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engines stopped*

**FLYING IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

Edited by R. Gerard Ward and Susan W. Serjeantson

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PANDANUS BOOKS  
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies  
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Cover photograph: On final approach to Kundiawa Airstrip.  
Photograph: R. Gerard Ward

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*The editors — still comfortable with single-engine Cessnas.  
Photograph by Bob Cooper*

# INTRODUCTION

Sitting over dinner one evening, Sue Serjeantson and Gerard Ward exchanged stories of their experiences when flying, as passengers, in Papua New Guinea. This often happens when those who live, or have lived, in Papua New Guinea turn to reminiscence. They realised that amongst their circles of friends they had heard many such stories — perhaps it would be worth collecting some of them together. This collection of recollections is a small selection. It is not a collection about disasters, although at the time many of the events occurred, the participants may have thought that they were about to be involved in one. Later such experiences became the bases for stories to be told — to amuse, to elicit gasps of horror, to laugh about, or just to impress. In almost all cases the authors, those who had the experiences, were passive participants. Most were not the pilots dealing with the problem. Most had limited knowledge of the technicalities of flight. Thus, as passengers, what *could* happen was often in the back of the mind. This sense was accentuated for most of the writers by the fact that they came to Papua New Guinea from other countries where air services tended to be operated by larger aircraft, and where air travel was routine and uneventful. Getting to know Papua New Guinea almost inevitably meant flying in small aeroplanes, and over or through spectacular landscapes.

Most of the writers of the stories were sojourners in Papua New Guinea. But most had more than a passing acquaintance with the country and thus were aware, sometimes too aware, that flying in that country could be hazardous, that clouds often had hard centres, and that visual flight rules were the norm, at least until the turboprops and jets arrived to carry aircraft routinely above the highest mountain ranges.

Perhaps surprisingly, this could be a book for nervous fliers. After all, these events happened, and with no disastrous results. In fact, flying in Papua New Guinea has been remarkably safe in the last 50 years, especially on scheduled flights. The roads are much more hazardous!

In canvassing people to contribute to this collection, the editors simply asked around amongst those of their friends who might have stories to tell



from their time in Papua New Guinea. No effort was made to get a 'representative' selection of authors, with the result that a high proportion of the stories are written by academics, and by people whose time in Papua New Guinea was primarily in the 1960s through to the 1980s. Thus the stories span the late colonial period and the earlier years of independence when the organisational structure of aviation was being developed. Since then the context of air travel in Papua New Guinea has changed — the participants (crew, staff and passengers) are no longer dominantly expatriate. Thus the stories should be read as reflecting an earlier time.

There are many other stories that could be told. Some have remarkably wide circulation. For example, the one about the day the passengers sat in a plane on the tarmac at Goroka for some time without a pilot. One of the last passengers on board had taken a seat near the back but soon started making loud comments about the absence of a pilot. Finally, he got up, marched up to the pilot's seat exclaiming loudly: 'If nobody else is going to fly this ... plane, I'll do it myself.' He was of course the scheduled pilot (and owner of the aircraft and the airline), but how were most of the passengers to know?

Or the occasion when a small plane flipped onto its back after landing as the pilot braked hard to avoid a crowd of people standing around the district office at the top of a steep airstrip. Nobody on board was hurt but while they still hung upside down in their seatbelts, the district officer brought relief. He wrenched open the door from the outside and, thrusting in an opened can of beer, said 'Jeez, youse must all need a drink!'

As befits a country with the tourist slogan 'the land of the unexpected', travellers did come to expect the unexpected. One friend of the editors never flew in Papua New Guinea without wearing heavy boots. He wanted to be well shod for that walk out from the crash site. Fortunately he never had to do so. And once when flying in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, one of the editors discovered that the pilot was a former New Guinea Missionary Aviation Fellowship pilot. When asked how he liked flying in that relatively flat province after New Guinea, he replied simply: 'No challenge'. That seems to sum it up — flying in Papua New Guinea is different.

*...and then the engines stopped*

## **AND THEN THE ENGINES STOPPED**

R. Gerard Ward

There were only three passengers, and the pilot, for the flight from Hagen to Moresby via Mendi. As we clambered into the front four seats of the 8-seater Piper Navaho, the calm clear morning promised a pleasant flight, with good views of the country below. Watching the pilot's careful pre-take-off checks and his assured though relaxed style inspired confidence. At first during the short climb the forested slopes of Mount Hagen rose above us but we climbed higher to look across the tree-line at the rocky jumble of the glaciated summits of Ialibu and Hagen. As we levelled out and the pilot trimmed the aircraft for the short hop to Mendi, my eyes glanced idly over the instruments, noting with casual approval that both fuel gauges registered full.

There was just time to find that the passenger to my right was a missionary, also going to Moresby, before we nosed down to the long white Mendi strip, surfaced with limestone from a nearby outcrop. In the ten minutes on the ground a few small packages of cargo were loaded, a manifest document was signed. We were ready to go. There were no extra passengers. It would be a perfect morning to see something of the southern margins of the highlands on the next leg, and I'd always wanted to see the karst country where great pinnacles of limestone spear up through the forest canopy like bristles on a giant but very dirty hairbrush.

After the climb out of Mendi the pilot levelled out, trimmed the aircraft again, set his course for the Moresby beacon, and turned on the autopilot. He was in a suitably relaxed mood for such a fine clear morning. He swung around, hitched a leg over the arm of his seat and

started chatting — businessman, missionary, geographer and pilot. Only the pilot and I were interested in what was going on outside — the pilot for an occasional glance around the sky, and for me a fairly steady watch of the forests, occasional garden clearing, ridge-top cluster of houses or steep tumbling river. Flying is exhilarating for a geographer for the insights it gives of the land below.

Turning to rejoin the conversation, I suddenly noticed the fuel gauges — the arrows of both showed well under one-quarter full. If we'd used more than three-quarters of the fuel in about 35 minutes flying, how would we reach Moresby, over an hour of flying away? Rather nervous about the delicacy of asking the pilot such a naive question, I drew the missionary's attention to the problem. He had no qualms.

'Why are the fuel tanks so empty?'

'Oh, that's all right. I'm just using up the emergency tanks. Look!'

Turning languidly forward and settling properly into his seat, the pilot twiddled some hidden knobs under his seat. To our satisfaction, and silent relief, the arrows swung across to show nearly full. Having satisfied our ignorant concern, he switched back to the emergency tanks, returned to his side-on position and resumed talking. By now most subjects of common interest had been exhausted, and in the face of this the pilot started with 'Have you heard the one about ...'

There followed a number of dirty stories. Inevitably the businessman in the right-hand front seat felt duty bound to respond with a few in the 'Mummy, Mummy' genre such as 'Mummy, Mummy, I've lost my virginity'. 'Don't worry darling, ...' I tried to recall at least one of the hundreds of dirty stories I'd heard, and told. For some reason I suffered total memory loss. Then the missionary told a surprisingly vulgar story. I was in trouble. How embarrassing for a man not to be able to tell a dirty story when the social context demanded.

There was an expectant pause as they waited for my contribution. And then both engines stopped virtually simultaneously. We'd become a glider. The nose dropped, the rush of wind was the only sound. I looked out and the wonderful karst below was now an appalling prospect, its

sharp teeth reaching up and no clearings in sight. How far would this thing glide? Why wasn't he turning towards the south coast? Surely there would be an airstrip somewhere. That isn't walking country.

The pilot's reactions were quick. No more languid style. Back into his seat, autopilot off, fumbling under his seat, the fuel gauge needles stagger back to nearly full. Still the rush of wind. Then one engine coughs, splutters, and dies. Another cough and splutter, but this time it fires and shudders into life. A few moments later the other engine coughs and restarts. The nose comes up to the horizon.

For almost an hour we drone towards Moresby. Not a word is spoken. The autopilot stays off. We descend for a neat landing, and taxi in to the terminal. We muttered muted thanks as we climbed out.

I've often wondered if the Almighty was giving the missionary an awful warning, or just saving me from undue embarrassment. I guess I'll never know. But now I'm always prepared. 'Have you heard the one about ...'

Small planes could do far more than the Fokker Friendships since they could land on pocket handkerchiefs and go into very remote rough airstrips. They could fly up narrow valleys, navigated by visible distance to the treetops on either wingtip (or so it seemed), and they could give you much better views of the landscape. You always felt much closer to the elements — sometimes too close. On one memorable trip during the Simbu planning study in 1975 Diana Howlett, Robin Hide and I were bound for Kundiawa from Karimui. After belting ourselves into the 6-seater plane in a clear blue sky we bounced down the runway and, as we shot upwards out of the last gigantic bounce, the door flew open. Diana, next to the yawning gap, was treated to the sight of her hat floating down into the treetops far below and found herself clamped to her seat by the combined weight of Robin and I — neither of us wanted to lose our boss. The pilot's laconic comment 'Don't panic' was met by swift rejoinder, 'Of course I'm panicking. What else is there to do?' All was well. The plane completed a U-turn, lined up on the airstrip and descended quietly and under full control to earth. We then closed the door and prepared to slink ignominiously off again. It was not to be. Out of the forest came a cacophony of truck and motor-bike engines — every mobile vehicle in Karimui coming to pick up the bits. The next time, flanked by a large, highly vocal audience, we made it.

*Elsbeth Young*

*...and then the engines stopped*

## **LET'S SEE WHAT YOU DO FOR AN ENCORE**

Susan W. Serjeantson

I was working on leprosy at the time. It was the early 1970s, when the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research was located in Goroka but had a coastal base at Madang hospital. This was the laboratory for my leprosy work, where I brought blood from the villages for testing.

Now I was going to Manam Island, packing up patrol boxes and ticking off the check-list. Needles, bottles, cotton wool, methanol for swabbing arms, ... Methanol! I froze! Only last week I'd arrived at the hospital to find a man dead in the adjacent lab. One of the hospital staff, he'd let himself into the lab after the tavern closed and drunk methanol from the laboratory shelf. Methanol! Hardly tolerated even in the minute quantities added to ethanol to make methylated spirits, it was lethal in its pure form.

Shaken by my colleague's death, I knew I couldn't take methanol into a village. What if it was taken from my gear and mistaken for metho? The consequences could be horrendous! I searched the lab shelves for a substitute. There was a half-used bottle of anaesthetic ether, perfectly suitable for swabbing the arms of blood donors.

The cargo was loaded into the rear of the single-engine Cessna. My heavy patrol boxes first, then miscellaneous cargo, and then a passenger in the rear seat. I sat up front with the pilot as we took off for Hatzfeldhaven. There I would meet my assistant, a medical orderly at the Seventh Day Adventist Mission leprosy hospital. We would take the boat to Manam the next morning.

Everything was going to plan. I was excited by this latest expedition and chatted easily with the pilot. We climbed up over the rows of coconut

palms and the turquoise reefs. I suppose it was hot — it always was, so it didn't bear notice or comment. But suddenly, a smell; a strange, pervading smell in that hot and heavy tropical air. It was an unmistakable smell, but I didn't want to believe it. Was the smell inside or outside the Cessna? I opened the side-vent to check. It was inside the cockpit, for sure! It couldn't be! It was the anaesthetic ether, gently rising to its boiling point as we gently rose above the clouds!

My childhood flashed past my eyes. 'Can anyone tell me,' Mr Barker, the science teacher, was saying, 'why you can't make a decent cup of tea on the top of Mount Everest?' As the Cessna gained altitude, the boiling point of the ether fell even lower — and the cabin seemed ready to explode with the fumes.

'Do you smell something strange?' I asked the pilot. Innocent.

'Nothing unusual,' he said casually, symbolically patting my knee. Just another nervous nelly in his single-engine plane. I redirected the side-vent, trying to give him a blast of fresh air.

I turned on the passenger behind me. 'Yu no ken smok!' The pilot looked at me sideways, thinking I was airsick. I was going a pale shade of green.

'I'm sure I smell something,' I said to the pilot, trying to gauge the flying time to Hatzfeldhaven. Could we possibly make it without my having to confess? A leaking bottle of flammable liquid in the cabin! The pilot could charge me!

But he seemed quite oblivious to the ether — perhaps he need never know! How much ether would it take, I wondered, to knock out a healthy, 80-kilo man? Would I go out to it first, before I warned him? How long could I hold out? The air from the vent wasn't helping at all — would it be worse if the ether were sucked out into the engine?

'That smell,' I confessed at last. 'It's in my patrol gear. It's ether.'

'What do you mean, "ether"?' asked the pilot. 'What sort of ether?'

'Well, anaesthetic ether, actually,' I replied.

LET'S SEE WHAT YOU DO FOR AN ENCORE

'An-aes-thet-ic?' He spoke slowly. Was he always so dopey or was his brain already fogged? 'You mean, *anaesthetic*!'

My words tumbled out. As I tried to explain, his eyes slowly widened. 'How long does it take,' he whispered in horror, 'to put you under?'

'I could climb back there,' I said helpfully, 'and try to get it out of my patrol box. But it's under a pile of cargo.'

'Don't move,' he said, as if it was a time-bomb. 'We're going down!'

We were still well short of Hatzfeldhaven. He grabbed for the radio as he nose-dived towards a jungle clearing. In silence we landed at Josephstaal. The pilot talked with the patrol officer as I single-handedly dragged the cargo off my patrol box and recovered the bottle. The lid was still tight. I contritely emptied the contents onto the grass, a safe distance from the plane.

'Let's go,' said the pilot. 'Let's see what you do for an encore.' The man was more relieved than angry.

'I should report you to DCA,' he said.

But I wasn't listening. What about the Department of Civil Aviation! What was I supposed to use in place of the sacrificed ether? Sterile coconuts?

'They shouldn't let you loose, you know.'

Perhaps there'd be a bottle of scotch at the SDA mission.



In the 1970s, several small towns in the Highlands still had airstrips that were part of the urban centre. While, for safety reasons, there were efforts to separate planes from people, animals and vehicles, this was often quite difficult to achieve, particularly when, as in Kainantu, the airstrip cut the town neatly in half. The solution here was to cut gates through the perimeter fence, leave them open and then ring a bell when a plane was about to pop over the end of the airstrip. This fairly informal system worked quite smoothly, although on one occasion an inebriated non-indigenous Kainantu resident did cause trouble by squeezing his Toyota through the gate and attempting to take off in the general direction of Lae. He did not become airborne at the end of the strip, but crashed ignominiously onto the road below. He survived!

*Elsbeth Young*

...and then the engines stopped

## THE DAY MATT GOT THE DCA

Gavan McDonell

‘Something that someone might read on a long flight,’ Gerry had said when he rang that Saturday afternoon. ‘That’s the sort of thing we had in mind. Nothing elaborate, or heavy. You know how all of us in New Guinea who did any travelling at all had *some* sort of aviation tale to tell, with all those little aircraft and those funny strips. There was always *something* happening in the air or on the ground, wasn’t there? You know the sort of thing — amusing, droll, perhaps, and,’ he repeated, in a final inspiration of instruction, ‘good for a long flight.’

Amusing? Droll, perhaps? Good for a long flight?

What about, I thought, that afternoon I’d flown back in an old Piaggio from the Milne Bay District, as it was then known. We had not finished the last meeting with the District Commissioner until nearly five and he had then driven me to the airstrip, finalising notes on the day as we went. The Piaggio didn’t arrive from Popondetta until almost half past the hour, and the day was closing under banks of heavy cloud even as we took off. By the time we were approaching the Owen Stanleys the cloud banks had mushroomed to vast pillars of dense darkness, raging and soaring with lightning-ringed black holes.

The small aircraft bucketed malevolently and the pilot pointed its nose steeply upward to try to escape the maelstrom. Through gaps beneath the doors and under the windows streaming clouds of grey vapour pushed into the unpressurised cabin. Fellow, beleaguered passengers in the seats around became smudged ghosts. Winds shrieked. At nearly 18,000 feet the pilot levelled out. It was 30 minutes later and nearing Port Moresby before he

felt it safe to lose height. Touching down at Jackson's Airport, we all had splitting headaches. I slept till ten next morning and dreamt of sharks.

Amusing?

Or the morning we were coming out of Mendi in the Southern Highlands and the tall cliffs of clouds had congealed earlier than usual. They were about to close off the 'window' of about half an hour which was all the time each morning that the skies parted enough to allow a plane to penetrate a ring through the clouds and to get above the spikes of towering crests which formed the mountains around the town. The pilot had called for the passengers to race aboard. I was placed in the seat beside him as a special honour I was not so glad to receive. In a few minutes he was spiralling the aircraft slowly upwards, to gain height as rapidly as possible, in laborious, churning corkscrews. The blue, black, bilious clouds above us, around us, below us. Wisps floated past the cabin. He was peering intently upward, flying blind. 'The problem is,' he murmured to me, as he craned his neck around awkwardly to see, in a mildly inquiring kind of way, 'there are big rocks there in those clouds.'

Droll?

Or perhaps that Friday, at the end of a long week spent in a Bell helicopter — one of those small jobs with the plastic bubble for a cockpit. I had been reconnoitring the Western Highland ranges for the proposed routes for the Second Highlands Highway. The pilot, Bob, was vastly competent, a former Squadron Leader in the Navy's Air Arm, and he had kept me entertained for hours with scary tales of being catapulted off aircraft carrier decks at multiple G, combat derring-do, and the like. We had spent the first part of the week flying up and down the steep mountains to the east. But this day, the last of the survey, we were descending into and rising over deep river valleys and jagged, jungle-covered ridges, tracing impossibly rugged, potential highway routes which ground surveyors had struggled along, yard after yard, way there below, and marked out on maps. Down into the shaded hollows, the river gleaming below, up and out at 5,000 feet and into the sun.

But as we descended one more time the engine cut and, like a sick dragonfly, the chopper started to spiral downwards. Only a day or so

before, we had been talking about helicopters and their wonderful tricks, and recalling funny doings, and Bob had said, ‘But, you know, they’re aerodynamically unstable. They just drop, just drop, just spiral around with the rotor, and drop’. And here we were, just dropping, dropping, motor silent, towards the river below. At not much above tree level, the engine coughed and took up again. The cool, experienced Bob pulled and pushed the controls with not a word. There were a few more coughs, the rotor spun vigorously, kept spinning, and we sped off up beyond the hills.

A few years later I ran into Bob in Darwin and, over a beer, we recalled that day. I confessed the fear in the bowels that had possessed me. Bob finished his beer and, as he turned to leave, he said, ‘I hope they cleaned out *both* sides of the cockpit properly that day.’

Good for a long flight?

No, Gerry, the only feeling common to those stories was plain and simple terror.

In fact, when I thought some more about it, Gerry, the drollest aviation tale in those years wasn’t about a particular flight at all — it was about the day Matt got the DCA.

It was a day not long after we’d set up the office that later became the Department of Transport, and then Transport and Civil Aviation. Under ‘home rule’ we took into the new office all the transport functions, like roads, and ports, and shipping, much of which had previously been handled by Commonwealth Departments — but not civil aviation. This was considered by the Federal Government to be far too important, and sophisticated, to be entrusted to the new Papua New Guinea government and its fledgling transport office. Everything to do with flight was the province of the Federal Department of Civil Aviation, which had for years been under the genially imperious rule of its Director-General, Sir Donald Anderson. Anderson, the Department’s first D-G at the age of 38, had built his fief into a great ‘Department of State’, as he liked to call it, ponderously but accurately. Civil Aviation had become, along with Treasury, not only a whale among the minnows of other Commonwealth Departments, but also a good-sized fish in the waters of international affairs. Civil aviation rights, and all that went with them, had become a weighty policy tool.

So PNG, as a future foreign state, had a double call on Civil Aviation's stewardship — as one of its regions to be regulated, and as a future rival to be cultivated. Perhaps because of these dual strands, Sir Donald seemed to take a rather paternal interest in me as the representative of the new aviation power to be, and would sometimes give me access to secrets of his long and successful reign. In Moresby one day on one of his visits to the DCA's northern domains, he vouchsafed the unprecedented favour of a visit to my office. After some chitchat and an exchange of signed correspondence, we sat back in the comfortable chairs I had purposely borrowed for the day, and had a collegial cup of tea. It was accompanied with home-made biscuits donated by the wife of one of my senior officers, an old *kiaip* well aware of the rare honour of the occasion. Growing fond and genial and reminiscent — for he was sincerely and rightly proud of all that had been accomplished by civil aviation, and Civil Aviation, in PNG — he passed on to me how, he said, he had contrived all of the then fortunate condition of Australian aviation matters: it was, he confided, by adhering to a guiding principle — that safety, with all the technical expertise that accompanied it and was required for it, was the surest basis on which to build a secure policy position. That was all — and, of course, always he continued, always, keep your most controversial legislation until the government has other hot potatoes on its hands. Few governments can handle more than one at a time. And with a warm handshake and a friendly wave he went out, plumped his large frame into the spacious, chauffeured Commonwealth car, and departed for Jackson's Airport and home office in Melbourne.

About that time, DCA announced that, after a long review of operational standards, it had decided that many of the aerodromes in PNG that had been available for use by DC3s would no longer qualify. Because there were few interregional roads anywhere in the whole country, much of which is very mountainous, the DC3 had long been the workhorse. Aeroplanes had done the work in PNG which mules and donkeys and horses had done in most other parts of the world. The withdrawal of DC3 flights would have profound effects on the lives of many, especially those living in remote areas of the centres of both Papua and New Guinea, which lay far from sea services. This new rule had

been based upon a survey carried out in mainland Australia with its very different conditions, and as part of international agreements, to which Australia was party, for improving standards in developed Western countries; but in those early days, soon to change, it was pretty much one rule for all, and PNG would have to comply also. There was consternation in the House of Assembly, then often known as the 'Parliament of Roads and Bridges', so many and loud were the Members' calls for better transport. The Highland Members, especially, were angered and anxious, and during the next meeting of the House I had a visit from Matiabe Yuwi, generally known as Matt, a new and ebullient Member for the Southern Highlands. This region, lying northwest of Moresby, had been the last area to be contacted by Europeans. In the extremely broken terrain, much of it, like Mendi, at altitudes of several thousand feet and higher, aeroplanes, especially the DC3, had been for years the lifeline for supplies and services to the people, living in small and scattered villages, wisps of cooking smoke rising from their thatched huts. Matt had been born in the early years of the Australian Administration, showed the mark of those years in his clan initiation-severed first joint of the little finger. He was a bright lad and when he grew up he became, like others in the early Houses of Assembly, an interpreter, able to mediate between his *wantoks* (his local brethren), in 'placetok', and the Australian *kiaps* (district officers) and their staff, often from elsewhere in the Territory, in Pidgin.

Matt entered the office beaming broadly but, when he took the seat I offered him, the brightness and good humour disappeared and he burst into dynamic, emotional Pidgin, at a flood much exceeding my meagre skills in the language. My colleague, Ian Burnet, a former *kiap*, sprang into the gap, and soon an impassioned dialogue lit the office.

'It's about the new DC3 standards. Matt is very upset, very upset, about the DC3 ruling and is threatening all sorts of hassle,' Ian said in a hurried pause. 'What will we say?'

'Tell him it's DCA's job. We have already written many letters to DCA and the Minister and we've had no result. They won't change their minds.'

A further brief, equally passionate exchange.

‘Who and where is DCA, Matt wants to know.’

In this context, in Pidgin, ‘DCA’ could have meant, as we assumed, the person who represented the Department, the Regional Director for PNG, not the Department itself. At the time this was Kel Barclay, a calm, conscientious and wise official of great experience and resourcefulness, a resourcefulness which, however, on this occasion, as we were soon to discover, was not sufficient. But the term ‘DCA’ could also have meant the Director-General, or even the Minister for Civil Aviation himself.

We explained to Matt what he already knew, that Kel was the Regional Director but that he answered to ‘Melbourne’, Melbourne being Sir Donald, the ‘big man’ himself, and that the ‘big man’ — who in fact was a very big man, well over six foot and built in proportion — answered to the Minister, also at the time in Melbourne.

The Minister for Civil Aviation was Robert Cotton, later, in the 1970s, made Sir Robert Cotton and, in the 1980s, the Australian Ambassador in the United States, a conservative gentleman of the old sort, possessed of an illustrious career, honour and humour.

‘Matt wants to talk to ‘DCA,’ Ian reported, and, heralded by an enthusiastic phone call from me to ‘DCA’ explaining the mission, he departed with his now-smiling charge down to Civil Aviation’s offices near the Harbour.

As Ian later told it, Matt, cheered by his early success, wasted no time.

They were met by Kel with his customary courtesy and quiet *sangfroid*, beneath which, as a good official protecting his Department’s policies, stratagems for a delaying action were already gelling. Matt was soon ensconced in a comfortable armchair and offered tea and sympathy, but, aware of his tactical advantage now that he was within the enemy’s camp, and escorted by a former *kiap*, no minor Administration official, he launched immediately into the rolling crescendos and dramatic tempi of a full-blooded Pidgin denunciation of the new DC3 standards, a preview of what he would say in the House, a wrenching appeal for help to the

women and children of the Southern Highlands, and ending with — most dramatic and startling of all — ‘I want to talk to “Melbourne”!’

‘You want to talk to Melbourne — now?!’ Kel incredulously queried.

‘Now,’ Matt insisted.

‘You want to phone now to the D-G?’ said Kel in a mildly conceding, but firm tone, which implied that it could *only* be to the D-G.

‘To “Melbourne”,’ Matt confirmed, ‘not to small boy, to Minister.’

The words ‘small boy’ hovered in the still air of the office and the shade of Sir Donald appeared, to the eyes of the Europeans present, in one corner.

As the new world of Western representative politics developed in PNG, many foreigners were surprised to find that Highlanders, like many other Territory people, apparently unschooled and even ‘primitive’, as the word was those days, had an apparently innate and acute sense of status, protocol and role. They would not have been so surprised if they had been more aware of the sophisticated subtleties of village, clan and inter-clan relationships. Matt knew very well, even though this was his first House, that, to get things done, politicians talked to politicians.

How it all was acted out was never quite sure, because it was emblazoned with legend even before Matt and Ian had got back to our office. Kel remonstrated, it seems, quoted the overwhelming authority, the good intentions, the trustability of the D-G (never before so scandalously referred to); he dwelt on the Minister’s jammed timetable, the difficulties of getting him on the phone, the wisdom and good sense of talking further with the local officials, all desperately anxious to assist the people of the fledgling nation-to-be, the ...

It was all over pretty quickly, really.

We got the official advice about two weeks later by letter signed by Sir Donald. The introduction of the new DC3 standards had been deferred for two years because of new information that had come to hand and the need to assess its impacts more fully.



## ... AND THEN THE ENGINES STOPPED

Matt came round to see me on his next visit to Moresby. He didn't even refer to his conquest. He had plans for building a new road from Mendi to Mount Hagen, the capital of the Western Highlands, one of the main towns on the Highlands Highway. This would link Mendi by land to Lae, on the coast. It was built within about a couple of years and the need for the DC3 was no more.

It would still be good to sit in one of those thatched villages, when, as I'm told, Matt and that great day when he got the DCA are remembered in verse and song and dance, in the crisp air, of a moonlit night, among those smoky fires.

...and then the engines stopped

## WELCOME TO DOGURA

Amirah and Ken Inglis

*Amirah.* For someone who hadn't flown much, mainly between Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney in a DC3 or a Fokker Friendship, the flight from Sydney in a four-engined Lockheed Electra was different. We took off from Sydney about midnight, landed at Brisbane for more passengers and I suppose more fuel. All in first-class comfort — that's how the Australian Government in those good old days let us travel. We sat in a semi-circular lounge at the back and opposite us a man huddled deep down inside a blanket and shivered wildly. Though I didn't know it, this was my first sight of malaria. Old hands settled to sleep, new chums dozed, until hostesses bustled about just before dawn bringing scrambled eggs. Then another first sight: the peacock blue and green tropical sea, the reef-fringed islands. Descending, I mistook the inner reef for land, not knowing how low those tides can be. On the tarmac at what we would come to call Seven Mile, yet another first sight, never to be forgotten: steps were pushed to the plane, and the luggage wagon dragged to it by men naked to the waist and wearing lap laps. Pressed up against the cyclone fence around the airport were dark men, women and children, some of the women suckling babies. Not one dark person among the passengers. Down the steps and across to the rustic terminal, we waded through hot air.

Times changed quickly through the late 1960s and early 1970s. On internal flights the majority of passengers were soon Papua New Guineans. At first all the pilots were white, and mostly young. But the aircraft were often old. Towards the end of our time, we flew from Hagen to Moresby in a plane piloted by a handsome young Motu we

knew named Aria Bou. By the caprice of the colonial encounter he had been drummed out of the University of Papua New Guinea's first preliminary year in 1966 (over the protests of some of his teachers) for plagiarism. Aria Bou had not known that, in this strange new world, copying something into an essay without naming the source was not an exercise in transcription but an offence. In those days any bright male high school leaver was snapped up to be trained as a local replacement for a skilled expatriate. So here he was, a grandson of people who had seen Captain John Moresby sail past Hanuabada in the *Basilisk*, a liveried officer of TransAustralia Airways (TAA), at the controls of a Fokker Friendship. He invited us to sit just behind him as he brought the plane gently down into Port Moresby's Jackson's Strip.

Other flights gradually taught us that flying within Papua New Guinea was not all first class. Initially we were alarmed in the Highlands to be flying only just above mountain peaks, the leaves on trees clearly visible. We didn't know then that later on, in smaller planes, we would be flying *below* the peaks. Pilots might tease the passengers for a laugh. At Mick Gallen's Hotel Kavieng, the world's northernmost Australian country pub, the pilot and navigator were among guests boozing far into the night. Next morning on the strip they did a good job of scaring us by saying they had the shakes.

*Ken.* One DC3, in which we sat side-saddle along the walls, had a plaque saying that it had been given by General Eisenhower to General Montgomery in the early 1940s. Reminders of war in the air were common. At Kavieng a Japanese Zero fighter was parked on the edge of the runway as a kind of memorial. Port Moresby's airport was officially known as Jackson's, after John Jackson, commander of the RAAF 75 Squadron which was based there, and who was killed in 1942. A four-engined bomber, a Liberator, could be seen just below the surface of the water on the approach into Jackson's. As you landed and took off you saw crescent-shaped mounds — dispersal bays made to shelter wartime aircraft from the blast of Japanese bombs. In Fairfax Harbour a twin-engined Catalina flying boat, the one survivor of a fleet that searched the ocean for Japanese shipping, sat among the pleasure craft of the yacht club.

## WELCOME TO DOGURA

One might be nonchalant about old DC3s but flying in smaller planes into rugged country remained pretty scary. Sitting beside or just behind the pilot gave great and sometimes terrifying views. For example, the strip at Tapini comes into sight as an impossibly small bit of land among mountains and on the edge of a precipice. The first time our pilot tried to land he didn't quite make it, and he throttled up, banked and tried again. Going out, you are over that abyss in what seems like a few seconds, praying that the engine won't conk out. When Amirah said to the pilot that she wished we had two engines, he replied that two engines were no safer than one. She thanked him for that expert advice. And ignorance of what the pilot was up to, or rather down to, often prevented us from being even more scared.

On a flight to Rabaraba, the strip beside the Anglican cathedral at Dogura, our single-engined plane climbed out of Jackson's and across and beyond the Owen Stanleys towards the northeast coast of Papua. The pilot laid open on his knees a Collins Clear School Atlas. As we flew on he kept looking out the window and then down at the tiny map of Papua and New Guinea. As we approached the coast, he said:

'Milne Bay! I thought we were coming to Collingwood Bay.'

Eventually he found Collingwood Bay, which was our destination. We had a fine view of the Anglican cathedral, a grand structure with a red corrugated iron roof, which someone described as North Queensland Romanesque. Our pilot flew out over the sea, turned towards the land, touched down on the strip, and jolted us as he put on the brakes and stopped just in front of a cliff.

We were greeted by the priest-in-charge, a patrician, languid and ascetic Englishman.

'Very interesting,' he said quietly. 'I think that's the first time an aircraft has landed here from the direction of the sea since a disabled bomber tried it — during the war. I think they say it was a B25 — it ran into the cliff. Welcome to Dogura.'

Out at the airstrip it was pouring rain, and we soon heard our Baron coming in, while the airstrip was, as always in remote areas in Papua New Guinea, lined with families waiting for the excitement of the day, a plane out of nowhere. The Baron landed, sending up sheets of water. Then halfway down the strip it slewed sideways and went the rest of the strip broadside, in a bigger spectacle of flying water, pulling up short of a cluster of banana palms. How he stayed on the strip only he knows, he had braked a little hard on the watery surface. It would be OK on the take-off, the propellers would be pulling the plane straight. We got in, laughing with all the people crowding close to watch, the pilot let off his claxon horn, which was *de rigueur* in that part of the world. The people loved the shock of it, and bundles of men, women and children tumbled all over each other as they rushed away from the plane, into the high grass, all laughing, and a new serrated line of smiling gleaming teeth formed up a bit further away. Both sides would be disappointed if the pilots did not engage in a bit of play with the crowds.

*Ross Fardon*

...and then the engines stopped

## STOOGING AROUND IN THE WET

Ian Hughes

The other pilots called her ‘Pussy Galore’. Very good and very experienced, they said, but in Australia not Papua New Guinea. Me too, for it was my first light aircraft flight in that land of rock-filled clouds.

It was the end of February 1966 and *kiap* Fred Parker and I were flying out of Kundiawa (‘Chimbu’ to pilots) for Goroka, Fred to District Office, me to catch a bigger plane south after six weeks of wet season sliding around Kere gardens in the Subdistrict of Sinasina.

Daulo Pass was clouded in — in fact, rain clouds were very low everywhere, so the little Cessna 172 waited. No other passengers.

‘Right,’ she said eventually, ‘we’ll have a go, and hope that the ceiling lifts a bit by the time we get up the valley.’

‘This will be interesting,’ said Fred.

Chimbu airstrip is one of those classic mountain strips, about a mile above sea-level, one way only, a mountain at one end and a drop into a gorge at the other. But it’s a good one. The usual light-aircraft route, as I later discovered, was ESE for ten minutes or so keeping south of the impressive slopes of Mount Kerigomna, turning half-left into the valley of the Mai River near Chuave Patrol Post, passing north of the limestone of Mount Elimbari and popping low over a tree-topped ridge into the Asaro Valley and Goroka. On a clear day, it was almost a straight line. But not this time.

Airborne, with the clouds just over our heads, fingers were firmly crossed. We held course over Sinasina for a while, but the only thing visible under the clouds over the Mai River were trees. Steep bank to get clear and back on a reciprocal course.

‘We’ll go back,’ she said, sweating, ‘and wait awhile.’ Nice landing.

Half an hour later the clouds seemed to have lifted a bit, so off we go again. This time we get past the turn, hoping to see daylight on the skyline ahead, but no luck, and a really steep turn to get out this time, bearing in mind the limestone just south of us. Plenty of rudder, no room for side slips here. She flies down the Mai to see if it has cleared at all on the south side of Elimbari, the long way round, and we stooge around a bit. No clear sky anywhere east, nor south or north either. Has the cloud come down again? The nervousness is palpable. Marvellous how it transmits to others. So back west up the Wahgi Valley and once more onto the airstrip.

A longer wait this time. More radio talk. Another little plane arrives.

‘Where have you come from?’

‘Goroka — yeah, the ridge is clear now.’ Third time lucky, they say, and it was — a copybook flight.

I’ve since flown that route many times in the dry season, wheels just over the treetops of that barrier ridge, wonderful views of river, forest and farming patterns, very satisfying. But never as exciting as that first time in the wet of February 1966.

*...and then the engines stopped*

## **HOP OUT YOU LOT: I CAN'T MOVE IT WITH YOU IN IT**

Marjorie Sullivan

We were in Kandrian, right at the start of 'the wet' on the south coast of West New Britain. There were four of us, and we had been reasonably lucky with the weather for a few days. We knew, though, that we and the airline were both pushing our luck. We were trying to keep to a complex schedule; they were still trying to fly fast little planes to service their south coast routes. Once it is really wet they admit that is not possible, and service the routes with Islanders, which can land happily in mud. After a very rough boat trip down the western end of the island and along the south, the weather had cleared up enough for two days of wonderful helicoptering, over spectacular reefs, lovely islands and, just a few kilometres inland, over tangled lowland forest and stepped streams with dramatic waterfalls and rock-rimmed pools.

We were at the end of two weeks of rather uncomfortable fieldwork. It had gone well, we were all happy enough, but the thought of hot showers, clean beds, fresh food and somewhere dry to eat and sleep was making us all very keen to fly back to Hoskins on the north coast where the 'dry season' was underway.

The last couple of days were spent near Kandrian. On the day before we were to fly back we had driven several kilometres inland from the town, and it had begun to rain just a little as we drove back into town that evening. We stayed on an island just offshore, and the rain had stopped by the time we motored across to the island. It rained a bit in the night. The roof leaked just above my bed, so I knew we'd had a few heavy showers. In the morning there was a lot of low cloud, and light rain showers as we travelled back into town in the dinghy.



The plane was scheduled for around 9 am. Kandrian is pretty small, and everyone in town knows who is wanting to fly out, so there is really no need to be at the terminal 30 minutes before the scheduled departure time. Anyway there isn't really a terminal, just a couple of sheds, with nowhere to wait comfortably. By the time we checked at the airline office it was raining steadily; in fact, the rain started to come down much more heavily from about 8 o'clock. So we waited in town near the Government Office until someone from the airline came along to pick us up, and drive us up the hill to the 'airport'. It is really better described as an airstrip.

We knew the plane was a bit late coming in, because the airline vehicle did not turn up until just before 9 o'clock, but that was not surprising given the low cloud. The bus to the airport was actually a standard district vehicle, a twin-cab four-wheel-drive utility truck. It turned out there were seven of us going out on the plane, so three people and all the luggage were pretty wet by the time we arrived at the airstrip.

That was the first time we had really given much consideration to the airstrip. It is a grass strip perched on a ridge above the town, and is not very large, even by Papua New Guinea standards. Driving past the day before I had noticed that it was rough coronus, and I had speculated about whether they had taken coral from the fringing reef near town to crush, or whether they had mined older raised coral from the cliff lines behind the present coast. What I had not noticed was how patchy the coral rubble was. In fact, only about two-thirds of the strip had a rocky cover, the rest was just a scraped clayey surface.

On that morning the most impressive feature of the strip was its very poor drainage. Sitting as it does, on top of a ridge, it might have been expected that the strip could have been built with a surface slope to ensure that it drained well, especially as the local sediments are very clayey, and the coronus capping was clearly a very thin veneer over that clayey ground. But somehow they had managed to scrape a very flat runway, almost perfectly horizontal, and had in fact placed the scrapings as a neatly contoured, low perimeter mound around the strip. When we arrived it was more like a shallow swamp than a ridge-line.

The plane was about an hour late coming in. We heard it for a long while before we saw it. The low cloud broke now and again, revealing several layers, and a few big towers of cumulus, surprising for so early in the day. Eventually a Cessna 402 came through one of the cloud gaps, around the edge of a big storm cloud which was obviously heading for Kandrian. Well, it would be a fast trip back and we could climb above some of the cloud — not like the Islanders. We couldn't see it land, what we saw was a wall of water and spray which skidded along the runway.

We knew a few of the passengers who came off the plane. They were all pretty pale, and simply made remarks like 'It's good to be down here'. We'd all seen the cloud, none of us was expecting we would do much reading on the trip back.

After the usual sorting of luggage — hurried up because the storm we'd seen coming had arrived, and the rain was tumbling in bucketloads — we all dashed for the shelter of the plane. The pilot cautioned us to keep the weight to the front, not to sit in the rear seats first. He didn't want the tail to drop down 'or it'll be buried in this stuff'.

At least it was dry inside the plane. The day was cool, because of the cloud, and we were very damp, and had all begun to shiver a bit. It was clear that we couldn't take off in the downpour, but everyone was cheerful enough about sitting it out somewhere dry. At least for the first half hour or so. Then we began to feel a bit restless, and some of us dug out books, or began to read the Rabaul news sheets from some of the seat pockets. The heavy rain went on for a long time, and the wind which had been driving it from the southeast had dropped. The pilot offered occasional remarks.

'It'll be OK, but you won't be comfortable. On this side there are a lot of storms, on the other side it's nice and clear, but really windy.'

'Gee, I hope this eases off. In fact, we could do with a bit of wind to dry it off.'

'Looks like this is the last day this season for this little one; back to the Islanders until the dry.'

He wasn't unhappy, but he was becoming a bit less chirpy as we sat there. Now and again he radioed to his base with an amended 'estimated time of departure and arrival'. After about an hour the rain eased to a very light shower. It looked like we might be able to go. It was a bit after the time we'd hoped to be landing in Hoskins, but only one passenger was booked on the afternoon flight to Port Moresby, and there would be another one tomorrow morning.

By then the airstrip resembled a lake, so the pilot decided to walk across it to check for the firm bits before he took off. Like the rest of us he was fairly wet. He'd got wet during the unloading and loading, but he had stopped dripping. He clearly didn't want to be any wetter, so he borrowed the only rain jacket one of our group had, which from then on was wet on both sides.

He looked a bit worried when he came back, which coincided with another storm cloud looming in.

'I think we'll lift off, but sorry, it looks like we'll have to fly straight into that. But I'll pull us up over the top of some of this cloud as soon as I can.'

So we taxied off to the very northwestern end of the strip. That end was just mud, and that was the main problem. It flew up into the air, showers of mud. Visibility was literally nil.

Well, the pilot had to see where he was going, so he opened the side flap on the cockpit and revved hard. That put the front of the plane ahead of the mud-spray from the front wheel, but only the front wheel. It is quite an experience to be showered with mud, splattered from head to tucked-up knees, inside a moving plane. We were a mess.

The exercise was pointless anyway. About halfway down the runway the pilot announced 'It's not safe' and, slamming on the brakes, did the aircraft equivalent of a slalom turn on skis. It saved the problem of steering around, and we taxied back to the 'apron'.

Then we sat for a long time. The pilot's mood was deflating visibly. He was undoubtedly contemplating the unacceptable possibility of having to leave the speedy little Cessna to spend the remainder of the 'wet' perched on the strip at Kandrian. While we sat there more rain showers

passed over, but at least the wind blew steadily, so we could hope that if there was a long enough interval between showers it might help to dry the surface. The strip still looked like a lake.

After a few hours, and only about 20 pages left to read in my book, there was another break in the rain. The pilot had another idea. He borrowed the wet rain jacket again, and waded along the strip. He spent a long time stamping around on the edges of the coral veneer. When he came back he announced his plan of action. It seemed to be the only way to leave Kandrian. We could take off on the firmer surface. There was only one problem, it was all at the wrong end. We couldn't use the more muddy northwestern end, so we would just have to take off downwind — the wrong way. We were a bit heavy to do that however, so the person last on the list was offloaded. He left looking as though he'd just won first prize in a lottery. Most of the rest of us seriously contemplated swapping places with him, but he grabbed his luggage and ran.

The cloud was beginning to close over again when the pilot made his most surprising announcement:

'Hop out you lot, I can't move it with you in it.'

Well, we were wet anyway, and the rain would get rid of some of the drying mud, so we got out.

'OK, walk right up that end of the runway,' he said, pointing to the southeast. We waded off. Mostly it was only ankle-deep, and on the crushed coral we could walk rather than slither. Part-way along the strip we were passed by the plane, revving furiously.

We climbed back in, with the engines shrieking. The pilot had to yell to be heard, to tell us this time to keep as far back as possible, so the nose would lift.

Then off we went. We catapulted down the strip, skimming along to start with, then the wheels began to be sucked in by the layer of sticky mud over the rubble. We could see the pilot practically hauling up on the controls, wishing the nose up. And then, just before the coral rubble gave out, we lifted off. There was a horrible lurch as the wind lifted the tail from behind, and for a few seconds it was a bit unnerving; we could

all look down on the Kandrian coastline through the less-muddy patches on the cockpit windscreen. Then we flew in an arc, the front came right up, and we climbed into the cloud layers.

The flight was ordinary enough. It was nowhere near as bumpy as I had feared, and on the northern side of the island we had some superb views. There was even hot water in the shower tanks at Hoskins. But that day will stay in my memory along with a few other 'special' flights in PNG, not because of the final nerve-activating take-off, or maybe even the worrying: 'Hop out you lot, I can't move it with you in it', but mainly from discovering the literal meaning of that obscure toast 'Here's mud in your eye', while sitting inside a moving plane.

*...and then the engines stopped*

## **WHERE'S THE BLOODY STRIP?**

William C. Clarke

My first experience of a Papua New Guinean bush strip was at Simbai, located in the mountains of what was the Madang District in 1964. Flying across the broad, low-elevation Ramu Valley from Madang was routine — just a plane even if small and single-engined travelling well above the ground. But after we entered the mouth of the Simbai Valley and followed its bending course upstream, and I watched the mountain walls on both sides of the valley get higher and higher above the plane, my perception changed. The plane became tiny and flimsy, a putt-putting dot in an immense sheer landscape.

As we approached the head of the valley, its floor rose closer and closer below the plane while the amphitheatre slopes ahead ascended far above our flight path. By the time the ground was only scores of feet, if that, beneath us my confidence in the pilot's sanity had almost vanished, for there was no airstrip to be seen anywhere. Then, he lifted the plane's nose, skimmed over the brow of a low hill, and immediately dropped the plane into a landing on the bottom end of Simbai's grassy strip. Flights out were about as suspenseful, requiring full power to clear the hill or else a quick lurch to the right around its side before the plane could begin its easy drift down the valley.

Six years later, after I had made several flights in and out of Simbai and come to know some other bush strips, I realised that the Simbai strip (even if it was concealed behind a hill) was an average if not better-than-average strip for a small mountain patrol post and it offered no great challenge to skilled pilots.

The next strip that gained my prize for inspiring anxiety was Koinambi, at an Anglican mission station in the Jimi Valley, across the Bismarck Range to the south of Simbai. Not only was Koinambi unusually short — I recall ‘eleven hundred feet’ being muttered by pilots wondering if their little Cessnas had too much weight to make the take-off — the strip had cliffs at both ends, one going down at the bottom and the other up at the top. This crinkled bit of handkerchief for landing a plane was located on a small ledge or river terrace some 400 metres above where the Jimi River roared through its inner gorge. Above the strip the too, too solid earth climbed more than a thousand metres to reach the cloud forest along the crest of the Bismarck Range.

My particular response to the Koinambi strip may have come in part because I had seen it being built when I had earlier walked through the Jimi Valley on my first visit to Papua New Guinea. Suddenly amid the quiet forest, I had come on a major earthmoving effort, making me think of how some of the great constructions of antiquity must have been organised. Under the direction of a young patrol officer, all the excavation and filling necessary were done with hand tools by lines of singing, shouting tribesmen, who swung picks and wielded shovels. They then carried off the loosened red earth on strips of hessian stretched between two poles. Short though the strip that resulted may have been, my knowledge of its mode of origin made its existence there impressive.

Take-offs and landings from Koinambi were also impressive, for they entailed spiralling up to climb above the inner valley or spiralling down to reach a level low enough to land. Once the wheels touched the ground, the pilot’s job was to stop the plane before it bumped into the upper end of the strip. Take-off at times meant accelerating on the ground all the way to the end of the strip and then feeling the plane dip lower into the valley before it began to gain altitude. Once airborne, one had to become accustomed to the sensation of looking up through drifts of cloud to see trees, not far away and disconcertingly high above the plane as it made its way through tributary valleys across the range towards Mount Hagen.

Other aerial adventures also had to do with the smallness of the planes in PNG, even on major routes. Once, when I was sitting beside the pilot in

a two-engined Baron, flying above the ridges and casuarina groves of the densely settled Enga country, the door beside me blew open. I reconfirmed Bernoulli's principle when I tried to pull the door closed against the roar of wind and noise.

'You can't,' shouted the pilot. 'It's impossible. The pressure's too great. Just leave it!' But he did then make an emergency landing at nearby Wapenamanda to close the door before flying on. Now, whenever I sit amid crowds of people in a big jet and hear the pilot instruct the cabin crew to 'please arm the doors and cross-check', this incident comes perversely to mind.

Then there was the time my big *bilum* of beautiful highland cabbages got off-loaded at Mount Hagen. I had been given them as thanks for a lecture delivered at a Lutheran mission high school and was flying back to Port Moresby, looking forward to delicious crisp greens in that hot, dusty environment. I checked in the *bilum* with my suitcase and boarded the turbo-prop Friendship, a big plane in those days. I watched out the window as the baggage was loaded and saw my cabbages safely stowed. Still watching, I saw them unloaded, piled on the cart, and hauled away. Waving at the flight attendant, I asked what was happening to my precious vegetables.

'Ah,' she said, 'the plane's full and can't carry any more weight. We wouldn't be able to get over the mountains.' At the time, it seemed a sacrifice to safety beyond the call of duty.

One last memorable flying experience may have been much less safe and had to do more with the human factor than the physical scale of the country or the character of the planes. My geographer colleague John Street and I were flying from Kundiawa to Kegsugl, planning to climb Mount Wilhelm. It worried me a bit when we were already sitting inside a Cessna on the Kundiawa strip and the pilot, a plump young Australian, squeezed in one extra passenger beyond the usual load of the plane.

'The more the merrier!' he mumbled. I couldn't help but wonder about our landing on Kegsugl's strip, at 2,600 metres, just below the limits of cultivation on the slopes of Mount Wilhelm. Could the plane, coming in fast and heavily loaded, make a safe landing?



‘Don’t be a coward!’ I told myself. ‘You’ve flown in bad weather into tiny strips; today is clear, and Kegsugl is a commonly used strip.’ But I had to admonish myself again about cowardice as the plane pitched off the end of the strip at Kundiawa and jolted downwards into the valley before gaining speed to start the climb towards Kegsugl. The Chimbu men sitting at the back looked unperturbed, smiling with their eyebrows raised centimetres up their foreheads. I felt more like the nurse sitting next to me, who had just arrived from Australia and had her teeth gritted together.

As we flew up the valley, looking down on a landscape of gardens, grasslands and houses scattered everywhere on the remarkably steep slopes, John commented from his seat next to the pilot’s: ‘The density of population certainly is high for country that’s so rugged.’

‘Yeh, and youse bloody couldn’t find a place to put a plane down there if you searched from sunrise to sunset,’ grumbled the pilot, shading his eyes with a hand on his forehead. He then rolled his head around and yawned deeply.

‘Where’s the bloody strip?’ he asked aloud a few minutes later. ‘Bloody thing must of fallen down the mountain!’

I hoped the question was rhetorical, and that the remark was made in fun. But John looked worried, eyeing the pilot sideways. After examining the slopes ahead for a bit longer, the pilot suddenly burped rather than said: ‘There she be!’

He jerked the plane to the left and began to descend sharply groundwards. We rocketed in to land, striking the ground, bouncing, coming to earth again, and rolling to a stop just at the top of the strip. The pilot clambered down, stumbled to the rear compartment and began dragging out the cargo.

‘Enjoy your climb,’ he said. ‘I’ll stick to flying.’

After we hired guides and began our ascent to the little grass resthouse whence we would climb to the summit of Mount Wilhelm the following morning, John said: ‘I hope I never again have the joy of being piloted by a drunk. He reeked of beer. I couldn’t help but smell it, sitting next to him. He must have just climbed off the stool at the pub before taking off.’

## WHERE'S THE BLOODY STRIP?

Later, when we came down the mountain again to Kegsugl, we decided there was nothing more constructive two geographers could do than to continue their earthbound walk all the way down the valley back to Kundiawa.



*... and then the engines stopped.*

## **A MORNING'S WORK**

R. Michael Bourke

I was at Wasu strip by 7am for the morning flight to Nadzab. It had been a good trip, one of my best. There had been a lot of travel — by foot, light aircraft, small boats and vehicles as I surveyed subsistence agriculture on the Huon Peninsula. Today, after five weeks of intensive fieldwork, I was more than ready for the quick flight to Nadzab. Once there, I could go down to Bubia to pick up the rest of my gear, then take the Air Niugini F28 to Moresby.

More passengers arrived. We were assured that the Talair plane would arrive sometime between 8am and noon. The morning wore on and the heat was overpowering in the Talair office 'waiting room'. The only seats to be found were 60 kg bags of coffee beans. The tropical sun was relentless. Finally, at mid-morning, there was the familiar drone of an Islander.

While the pilot, an American with long experience flying in Papua New Guinea, was attending to money and paper work, I chatted with his Filipino mate under the shade of the wing. It seemed that the owner of Talair had decided to transfer the Islander, one of the last left in the large Talair fleet, to a small airline that he owned in Manila. The Filipino pilot had been sent to Papua New Guinea to fly the aircraft to the Philippines. However, there had been a change of plans and the plane was to remain in Papua New Guinea. The Filipino had a few days to fill in before returning home and the American had invited him along to see some of Papua New Guinea. They had left Nadzab very early that morning and had been in and out of a series of mountain strips before arriving at Wasu.

The Filipino was impressed with the rugged country. He was especially impressed with the airstrips. He told me that the shortest strip in the Philippines was 800 metres long and it was at sea level. Since his arrival in Papua New Guinea, however, he had seen strips as short as 600 metres and at altitudes of up to 6,000 feet. It transpired that he hadn't previously flown an Islander and was rather relieved that he would not be flying one across open ocean.

At this point, the American strolled over and announced that, before we could leave, he had to duck over to Yalumet, an inland strip, to bring back a load of coffee. From Wasu the coffee would go by coastal ship to Lae. Consequently, the passenger seats and some cargo were removed from the aircraft, the two pilots climbed aboard and disappeared. Yalumet is at only 2,500 feet altitude but it lies at the bottom of a very deep valley. The route there from Wasu is up a limestone gorge which is some 3,000 feet deep. I'd flown into Yalumet earlier in my trip. Even by Papua New Guinea standards, the flight up the gorge is exhilarating with the almost sheer cliffs just off both wingtips of the aircraft.

An hour later they returned. As the coffee was unloaded, I counted the bags. Some mental arithmetic suggested that the Islander must have carried a load of over 1,000 kg of coffee plus the pilots — well above the legal limit. 'You kept 500 feet above the bottom of the gorge?' I asked the American. 'Of course,' he replied with a wink.

The Filipino looked subdued.

Seats and cargo were reloaded. Finally we were off. With two pilots, eight passengers, luggage and cargo, the aircraft was fully loaded. The American suggested that the Filipino do the flight. He reluctantly agreed.

The only scheduled stop was at Satwag. The strip there is only 600 metres long and is at 4,300 feet altitude. It lies across a ridge and is flat so that an aircraft can fly off into the valley below if it is overloaded. The strip was much shorter than anything the Filipino had flown into before. Nevertheless he did a neat, if nervous, landing. Two more passengers and we definitely had a full load. Probably over the legal limit for this altitude, I thought.

Then came a radio message from Nadzab that there was a medical evacuation at Kabwum. The Filipino pilot was only marginally less nervous as the Islander lumbered down the strip. Seconds after take-off, the valley dropped thousands of feet below us. It was a short flight to Kabwum. It had taken me a long day's walk to cover the distance on foot a week earlier.

The evacuee was a young lad with a broken leg. We sat and sweltered in our seats as the American carefully made the patient comfortable on top of the luggage and cargo at the back of the aircraft. The lad's guardian squeezed into a small bench seat already occupied by three people.

We were well and truly overloaded now. However, Kabwum has a good surface, a gentle slope by Papua New Guinean standards, and is long enough for an Islander, so the Filipino had an easy take-off. He climbed and turned to the south looking for the pass through the Saruwaged Range. But it was now midday and the gap was blocked by cloud. The American pilot turned and told us that we would have to go over the top. He took the controls and started the climb.

Our ascent rate, given the heavy load, was painfully slow. Every few minutes the stall warning light came on and the heart-stopping shrill of the warning horn filled the cabin. Each time the pilot eased the control column forward a little to gain speed and reduce the climbing rate. It wasn't only the Filipino who was nervous now. The smell of sweat hung in the cabin. A woman behind me prayed quietly.

As we crept up in altitude, I watched the country below. The villages in which I'd slept, the walking tracks and the little airstrips at Derim, Indagen and Konge grew steadily smaller. I also watched the fuel gauges with more than casual interest. They indicated that both tanks were well below a quarter full.

We climbed for some 30 minutes. Finally, the altimeter indicated 14,000 feet and the pilot set a beeline for Nadzab. As we flew across the range, the cloud broke for the first time. The summit of Mount Saruwaged, Papua New Guinea's third highest peak, was just 500 feet below us. The peak and glacier-carved valleys were a magnificent sight.

Downhill from here. The airspeed indicator nudged the yellow line showing top normal operating speed as we descended into Nadzab. On the ground safely, I waited beside the aircraft to unload my pack. The American checked the fuel. I asked how much was left.

‘Thirty-five minutes flying time,’ he responded.

‘Isn’t that below the legal limit?’ I ventured.

‘Perhaps a bit,’ he replied, ‘but we could have glided into Nadzab once we got over the range. There’s no fuel at Wasu and I didn’t want to spend a night there.’

Not wanting him to think me too critical, I attempted some small talk. ‘Well, another day’s work over. Off to the golf course now?’

He looked hard at me. ‘I’m off to Menyamyama shortly, and some more bush strips. That was just a morning’s work.’

*... and then the engines stopped*

## **THOSE THINGS HAPPEN ONLY IN LITTLE PLANES**

Malcolm Ross

I looked around the passenger compartment of the Air Niugini Fokker Friendship as we taxied out for take-off towards Port Moresby's single runway. The usual collection of bored expatriate public servants, foreign tourists craning necks for a glimpse out of the windows, nationals going home to visit relatives in Goroka or Madang, babies crying, children resisting their seatbelts, and the odd visiting businessman. There were about 30 of us, I think. This would be another of those utterly predictable weekly flights from Moresby back to Goroka. The one good thing about it was those high wings on the Friendship, so that every window offered a clear view of the terrain below. But it would never be as interesting as a flight in one of those little planes where you never quite knew what was going to happen next, and my opportunities to fly in one of them came only with sad infrequency.

The Friendship took off safely enough from Port Moresby. I always noticed the flare holders that lined the runway. Just once I was lucky enough to be on a thoroughly delayed flight and to see the blustering flares flashing past the windows as we made a twilight landing. But today was bright sunshine, and as we tracked northwest along the coast we left the arid yellows and browns of Moresby behind us. I was seated by a window on the right-hand side of the plane, looking down at the swampy coastal plain with its seemingly hundreds of glinting oxbows where rivers had long since lost their way in their search for the coast. At Yule Island (I knew it was Yule Island because the pilot always told us it was) we veered right and headed for the Highlands. The plane continued to climb, and up ahead I could see the mountains — or rather, I could see



the great rolls of cloud that told me where the mountains were. But this wasn't like one of those little planes, where you would tunnel under the clouds through the mountain valleys, the pilot always looking to make sure he didn't get hemmed in. No, the Friendship simply ascended over the cloud and flew under a clear blue sky. My wonder at the white billows beneath the plane had faded many flights ago, so I pulled out the book I always had in my briefcase for just these occasions.

Goroka sits in the Asaro Valley, one of those great wide valleys in the Highlands that teems with population but had been a sort of Conan Doyle-ish Lost World until the first European explorers arrived in the 1920s and 1930s. The Goroka airstrip is well out in the middle of the valley, away from the mountain slopes, with the township clustered around its upper end. I had always been vaguely curious about how the pilot knew when to dive down through those clouds to come out in the Asaro Valley, but we always arrived anyway so I had never worried much about the answer. As I was reading I glanced out of the window from time to time looking for that patch of green which would tell me that we were coming down into Goroka. It always amused me to figure out where we were, as I knew the valley quite well.

Finally, the patch of green came, and we were soon beneath the clouds. I looked to see where we were. Then I spotted an airstrip. Funny, I thought, that's not Goroka; there's no town around it. Anyway, the strip's too narrow. What are those buildings over there? Can't think of anything like them in the valley. Then it suddenly dawned that I had seen them from another angle: this was the Lutheran Mission's Tok Pisin school at Rintebe. We're in the wrong valley, I thought. This wasn't the Asaro. That river down there was the Bena Bena, one of the Asaro's tributaries. And we were flying up the Bena Valley towards the Gap. The Gap was a very high pass which had claimed one of those little planes during my time in Goroka. And the Gap's somewhere up ahead in the clouds. If the pilot doesn't do something soon, there'll be no room left to turn ...

Evidently the pilot thought so too. Suddenly he banked the plane into a leftward turn steeper than I had thought possible for even a small

airliner, just like one of those little planes. It felt as if we were almost vertical. The babble in the passenger compartment ceased as even the most blasé public servant realised something unusual was happening. Fists gripped armrests, knuckles and faces paled. Even the tourists, always in search of the new in this exotic land, stared around in disbelief as if to say, ‘We didn’t come here for this ... Won’t someone tell us what’s happening?’ But the pilot was too busy for that. I looked up at a mountain slope, the dense forest flashing past illegally near, and knew that we had made it round before I had even had a chance to think about being frightened. Thank God. We were pointing down valley, and a gentle right turn took us into the Asaro Valley and down to an uneventful landing in Goroka.

I thought those things happened only in little planes. And I still don’t know how the pilot knows when to dive down through those clouds...

We flew out with Bob Koenig several weeks before the close of the Yandera project, with a few of the geologists who were moving out. We had a Baron to fly us from Madang to Moresby. Most of our group were in, with the gear, and Bob and I were to go in last, when the plane tipped back with the load and sat on its tail on the tarmac. It was a strange and enigmatic sight, with the nose pointing up at the clouds. Bob immediately said he had seen 71 Christmases and would take his 72nd wherever he had to, but he was not going on that plane. But the pilots up there had to be good, many had been in Vietnam, and all was to be solved. Someone brought a pole, to prop the tail and restore the plane to horizontal, not a bad attitude for a plane at all. Clearly this had happened before. Heavy gear was re-stacked forward, and Bob was persuaded to get in with me. The pilot wound the trim as far as it would go. The propellers were started up, so their pull would hold the tail up. The pole was removed, and the plane stayed horizontal. Right as rain. 'We will not slow down,' said the pilot, 'got to keep the revs up or we might sit back again.' So we lurched forward, raced out onto the tarmac, turned onto the runway, and roared along. Yes, we had lift-off, we climbed slowly into the sky and sailed over the Owen Stanleys on a mill-pond day, and all was well in the blue sky over this magnificent country. Or was it? We wondered how we would fare when we had to stop at Port Moresby. At Port Moresby we taxied to a hangar, a man ran out with a pole, put it under the tail, and we all climbed out. That afternoon we were glad to see a commercial jet waiting for us.

*Ross Fardon*

... and then the engines stopped

## THE TARI GAP

Bryant Allen

‘I’ll show you how we do it,’ shouts Blue, above the noise of the engine.

He has the earphones on. So I just nod vigorously. We are flying just beneath a seamless layer of smooth grey cloud that stretches in all directions. By leaning forwards against the safety harness I can look up through the perspex windscreen. The bottom of the cloud is about 10 feet away, streaming over my head. I recall the claustrophobia felt as a child when lifted up to touch the ceiling. The walls of the room come up flush against the ceiling. I feel the ceiling pressing down upon me.

‘You’ve got to get up as much speed as possible well away from it,’ bellows Blue.

His cheerful optimism has stood the test of the take-off.

‘Just squeeze in the back with your mates,’ he had said to a sad-looking student who thought he was going to be left behind. There was one passenger too many for the number of seats.

Hulis are short, but as the *kiap* had told me yesterday, they are also built thick. Blue, who I thought should have known better, eyed his eight passengers and consigned the Hulis to the back seats on the grounds that he didn’t want too much weight up the front.

‘Hop in the front with me, mate,’ he said to me.

I clambered in over a battered black bag with maps sticking out of it and struggled into the harness. I scanned the instruments before me. Altimeter reading 6,000 feet on the ground at Tari, rate of climb indicator and airspeed indicator resting on their stops. The little toy

aeroplane in the turn-and-bank indicator rocked from side to side as the last bags of sweet potato and vegies were stuffed into the cargo pod beneath my seat. The intoxicating smell of high octane fuel drifted in the door and mixed with the smell of woodsmoke. The smoke came from the thatched roofs of houses across the airstrip and merged imperceptibly with the unbroken layer of cloud that covered the Tari Basin.

We taxied down to the far end of the airstrip, while Blue cursorily went through his take-off procedures. He snapped down the little plastic check-list aids mounted on the instrument panel with one hand while waving the other hand vaguely around the interior of the plane. He steered with his feet on the rudder bars. All the time he whistled noiselessly, drowned out by the engine.

‘Bravo Uniform Foxtrot taxiing Tari for Mendi. Eight pee-oh-bee<sup>1</sup>,’ he drawled into the microphone.

I swivelled around to look at my fellow passengers. They grinned helplessly back, black faces and white eyes and teeth. There were four jammed into the back seat, two sharing one seat belt. There were three in the next seat, and Blue and me up the front. Blue leaned over and grinned wickedly.

‘Not supposed to carry more than seven passengers, mate, except for kids. No worries, though. We’ve got more than 1,500 yards of strip here.’

In one smooth movement he swung the Cessna around at the end of the strip and pushed on full power. About halfway down the strip Bravo Uniform Foxtrot lifted her nose towards the sky. Then, with a piercing squawk of protest from the stall warning indicator, she settled gently back to earth.

‘Jesus! Those bastards in the back must be built like brick shithouses,’ shouted Blue, seemingly treating the added weight as a challenge.

He leaned forward on the controls, holding the plane on the ground. The airspeed indicator crept towards 90 knots. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the plane lifted. I watched the undercarriage and wheel

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1 People on board.

below me. They fell and rose and the wheel spun and slowed and spun once more, as it skimmed along the gravel-surfaced runway.

‘Come on,’ urged Blue.

The end of the runway was about 200 metres way and approaching far too quickly for my liking. Blue spun the large black trim control wheel beside his leg. I lifted my boots off the floor. The end of the strip disappeared beneath the plane. The propeller blast ran in a wave through the long grass growing beyond the gravel surface.

In those days the southern end of Tari airstrip ended abruptly about 20 feet above a swampy depression filled with tall cane grass. On the other side of the depression about 1,000 metres away was the Kupari Catholic Mission station. Foxtrot Uniform Bravo wallowed out over the cane grass on what appeared to be a short but fatal flight into a row of tall klinkii pines which surrounded the priest’s house. In one of those ironic twists of colonial history, the mission, having cut down all the pines on Huli sacred sites in order to mill them and build the church, had planted the same trees around their own sacred site.

‘This’ll wake the old bugger up!’ laughed Blue. I presumed he was speaking of the priest. He was coaxing every knot he could get out of the plane and at 100 knots it began to fly. Blue flipped the flaps lever up and eased back on the controls. We cleared the tops of the pines with feet to spare. I saw spiders running for cover along their dew-soaked webs, as we flashed by.

‘Bloody hell,’ shouts Blue, ‘those blokes must have stuffed some extra kaukau in when I wasn’t looking. Bastards! I’ll bloody fix them when I get back.’

I smiled weakly at him through still-clenched teeth. I couldn’t think of an appropriately flippant answer. At least he thought he was coming back.

‘You see, the problem on a day like this,’ bellows Blue, ‘is to get close enough to the Gap to see if it’s open, but leave yourself enough room to turn around if it’s not!’

His right hand, thumb extended into a wing, palm down, flies into a closed Gap, banks suddenly to the left and makes a sweeping turn across

the top of the instrument panel, and successfully returns to the controls. I can see the problem.

The Tari Gap is a grass-covered saddle, about a mile across, and 9,000 feet above sea level. On either side loom two massive old volcanoes, Ambua and Gerowa, gnarled and forest-covered, both over 11,000 feet high. On the other side the saddle rolls gently down into the Magarima River valley, while on this side it falls sharply into the magnificent Tari Basin.

'Watcha ya have to do,' shouts Blue, 'is to look up there.' He points out over the engine cowling, directly ahead at the cloud.

'Keep watching and if we're lucky, you'll see it.' He grins encouragingly. I look. Through the blurred propeller all I can see is the layer of cloud running up against a rugged mountain ridge about five miles away. We are flying straight at the ridge at 120 knots.

Is this a good time to tell Blue about Tom and Jack Fox, the tough twins from England, who in 1934 had climbed the ridge that is fast approaching us and had seen the slopes of the mighty Gerowa, shining with frost and hailstones, but not with gold? They had walked across the Basin from the west, knocking Hulis, who thought they were long-dead ancestors come to wreak revenge, backwards into ditches with heavy calibre rifles, while writing in their diary 'the natives are frisky today'. From the Gap, far away in the distance to the east, they had seen the coronetted peaks of Giluwe, and had known how to get home.

I glance at Blue. He is sitting upright in his seat, looking intensely at the mountain. This is not the time, and I am not sure he is interested in history. I too look at the mountain. How long before we reach the point of no return? I can't turn the knots into miles per hour in my head, nor do the divisions to work out how many miles per minute we are doing.

I wonder if Blue knows about the first plane to fly through the Gap. On 1 February 1936, about 10.30 in the morning. It was coming the other way, from Mount Hagen, with more illustrious passengers than us on board. Pilot Bob Gurney, with the legends of New Guinea exploration, Jim Taylor, Ivan Champion, Jack Hides and government anthropologist F.E. Williams, searching for Hides' imagined Tarifuroro. When the

## THE TARI GAP

Junkers emerged through the Gap, the huge single Bristol Jupiter radial engine let out a roar that could be heard all over the countryside. Somewhere below is the old fellow who told me how, as a 10-year-old, when he saw the huge bellowing bird in the sky, he fell down in a faint. This morning he will not be giving even an upward glance as I go by.

Pilot Gurney, from his open cockpit, less impressed with the landscape of rectangular fields and geometric rows of sweet potato mounds, hedges, ditches and paths, lined with casuarina trees, than with the dangers of the Gap, kept looking over his shoulder. When the cloud began to swirl back across the Gap, he immediately swung onto a reciprocal heading and flew back out of the Basin. Williams threw cowrie shells out of the plane with little handkerchief parachutes tied on to them, but I have never heard of anyone who found them.

Blue suddenly spins the trim wheel. The nose falls. We are descending towards the ridge at a low angle, on full power. Trees fill the windscreen. The cloud layer disappears upwards. I miss the claustrophobia.

‘There! Look up there!’ cries Blue. A tiny crescent-shaped sliver of white light has appeared beneath the cloud layer. A crack has opened between the ceiling and the walls.

‘She’s open’, says Blue.

He leans back on the yoke. Foxtrot Uniform Bravo, flying superbly now at 160 knots, responds immediately. My arms fall into my lap. My chin presses down onto my chest. The Hulis in the back howl in unison.

The ridge disappears. A brilliant light fills the plane. A huge mountain appears, reaching far above us. The plane is suddenly very small and insignificant, suspended in a beautiful void of cloudless blue, above dark green forest and patches of yellow grass.

I can see clearly where the deeply troubled Jack Hides led his patrol up into the Gap, where on a cold and windy night, one of his carriers died, and was buried, far from his home on the coast. Somewhere down there is his grave.

Blue is talking urgently on the radio. The little plane banks sharply to the right and then straightens up. Blue touches me on the arm and



points ahead. A small red and white object is coming straight at us. It flashes past on our left, propeller spinners chromed and shining, the sun a brilliant ball reflected in the perspex windscreen. The pilot, dark glasses, black moustache, white teeth grinning, looks at us, his hand held up against the window, the middle finger extended.

‘Up you too, mate,’ laughs Blue.

Three weeks later, mercifully flying alone, Blue flew deep into the Gap and found it closed. While carrying out a low, slow turn to extricate himself, Foxtrot Uniform Bravo stalled gently onto the boggy grass surface. A wing tip hit the ground and the plane looped. When it came to a halt, Blue had a broken leg. He crawled out and sat under the wing and waited for the search parties. He was found two days later when the cloud lifted, frost-bitten, sunburned and hungry, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

*...and then the engines stopped*

## **FLAGGING THE DIFFERENCE**

David Solomon

In July 1970 I was one of a group of journalists, cameramen and television reporters from the Press Gallery in Canberra who accompanied the then Prime Minister, John Gorton, on an official visit to the Australian Territory of Papua and New Guinea. The dual purposes of the visit involved politics — aimed at the Australian public on the one hand, and the leaders of the emerging political parties and their followers in Papua New Guinea on the other.

Two weeks before we left Australia, Mr Gorton had obtained his Cabinet's approval for a series of changes to political and administrative arrangements in the Territory which he would make public during his visit. They would involve more responsibility for the Territory's Ministers and its emerging parliament, bringing it closer, but not too close, to internal self-government. The proposals were intended to provide answers for the demands of some local politicians who were calling for self-government and even independence. They were also intended to head off calls by the Labor Opposition in Australia for a timetable leading towards full independence for Papua New Guinea.

The mood in Papua New Guinea was tense. There were thousands of people at Port Moresby's airport when we arrived, demonstrating their support for self-government. There were reports circulating that there would be a bigger and possibly less well-behaved crowd awaiting the Prime Minister when he arrived in Rabaul, our final port of call. Several leading political figures in Rabaul were prominent in the independence movement and they attracted great public support because there was also a special problem in East New Britain over land ownership and control.

In Port Moresby the Prime Minister's announcement of progress towards eventual self-government (no date had been considered or contemplated by his Cabinet at that time) was relatively well received. In the Highlands the fact that self-government was likely to be a long way off was regarded very favourably, and the Prime Minister and his party received an enthusiastic welcome. Several large sing-sings were specially arranged and thoroughly enjoyed by the visitors.

The Australian party was travelling within Papua New Guinea in two HS748 aircraft from the RAAF VIP fleet normally based in Canberra. This was to allow us access to most of the airports. One aircraft was used by the Prime Minister and the official party, the other by the media contingent. But once we had to fly to a very small landing strip adjacent to the showground where a sing-sing was to be provided. The HS748s could not get in there and therefore we transferred to two military Caribou aircraft that were stationed in Papua New Guinea. As we left the airstrip, we in the media party were disconcerted to discover that our plane was taking off with its huge rear door fully open. We were strapped into webbing seats on either side of the fuselage. In the middle at the rear of the plane the loadmaster, supported only by his harness, leaned out over the void to take spectacular photographs of the crowd in the showground as the aircraft seemed to stand on its tail and climb up and then away.

Standard procedure for the operations of the two HS748s was that the Prime Minister's aircraft would always take off and land first, and he and his officials would disembark immediately to meet the local dignitaries. Our aircraft would then land, and the television cameramen and photographers would dash across to try to get pictures of Mr Gorton as he moved with the officials across the tarmac to wave to the crowds. We would try to estimate how friendly/hostile they were before we were hurried into a bus to join the Prime Ministerial procession heading for our hotel or the first official function for that particular city.

Rabaul, in New Britain, was different.

We flew there on 9 July. As we circled the town we could see there was a huge crowd at the airport, later estimated by the police at about

10,000 people. We could not tell whether they were friendly or not, but the official party was apparently informed by radio that they were hostile.

Suddenly our aircraft banked and levelled out to take us into the landing pattern. The photographers were delighted because, for the first time on the trip, they would be able to get pictures of the Prime Minister actually getting off his plane. But then something happened that made us think again about why we had been given priority. At the end of the runway, before we taxied back towards the place where the official party was assembled to meet Mr Gorton, our pilot opened his window and erected, on a small standard, an Australian flag — a very official-looking Australian flag that usually adorned Mr Gorton's aircraft on such occasions.

We came to a stop and emerged to hear the shouting crowd. They certainly weren't cheering the anticipated arrival of the Prime Minister. But the important thing was they all remained behind the high barricades. The demonstration was clearly going to be peaceful.

That having been established to the satisfaction of the police and security officials, the plane carrying Mr Gorton then landed, safely.

We had the feeling that we were the canaries who had been sent down the mine to see if there was any real danger.

We later discovered that there were Royal Australian Navy patrol boats in the Rabaul harbour and that several RAAF aircraft had been positioned on an emergency strip above the town in case it was necessary to manage an evacuation of the official party. The local people were well aware of this strategy, and amused by it.

The rest of the visit passed without incident, and when we departed for Port Moresby the Prime Minister's aircraft took its more regular role, in the vanguard.

*Postscript:* The following week the Mataungan Association called out its thousands of members and supporters on the Gazelle Peninsula in New Britain to occupy land whose ownership they were disputing. Back in Canberra, Mr Gorton sent two Ministers including the Attorney-General to Port Moresby to assess the situation and recommend whether

... AND THEN THE ENGINES STOPPED

the government should be given the power to call out the Pacific Islands Regiment to suppress the demonstrations if the police could not cope. For a few days there was an uneasy stand-off between the Mataungan Association and the military outside Rabaul, but eventually the Mataungan leaders decided to call off their protest.

*...and then the engines stopped*

## **NOT A TOOTHLESS TIGER**

P.J. Grimshaw

The country was in the grip of southeast trade winds. The early morning drive along Ela Beach Road was more pleasant because of the breeze which came in from the sea. By midday the road would be hot and steamy. John Arthur, Regional Director of Civil Aviation for Papua and New Guinea, threaded his buff-coloured Chevrolet sedan, a legacy of World War II, between many of the potholes the recent heavy rains had exposed, as we headed for Jackson's Strip.

I had arrived at the Department of Civil Aviation's Headquarters at Konedobu at about 7.45 am to find John Arthur waiting. He told me that a trawler had been sighted off Abau and appeared to be fishing within the 12-mile limit, and the Department had been asked to investigate. At the Department's disposal was the CA70, a vessel the size of a small trawler. The CA70 was part of the back-up service needed when Catalina and Sandringham flying boats were introduced by Qantas earlier in the year for the Sydney/Port Moresby run. Arthur had already directed the CA70 to proceed along the coast to Abau and to search for the unidentified trawler. In the meantime we were to make an aerial search using the Department's Tiger Moth (DH-82), registration number VH-CAH.

We had taken delivery of this aircraft the previous year after the loss of the Department's Auster in a crash on take-off at Fisherman's Island, a few miles offshore from Port Moresby. The Tiger had been modified in Melbourne by having a radio installed and a canopy placed over the cockpit. Various radio parts had been housed in the storage

compartment located behind the rear seat. However, it was found that the radio was useless once the aircraft went beyond 3 miles from Jackson's Strip (now Port Moresby Airport). The radio's weight also caused the plane to become sluggish, and so the radio and canopy had been removed, thereby restoring wider vision to the pilot.

After the usual pre-flight ground checks, we pulled on our flying helmets, clambered aboard and taxied to the runway for a take-off that would pass over Bootler's Inlet. Once in the air, and at 1,000 feet, we banked to port and headed for Abau. Conditions at 1,000 feet proved more windy than the gentle sea breeze we had experienced on Ela Beach Road, and strong updrafts were encountered close to the shoreline. The Tiger bobbed and weaved from side to side but at 1,500 feet the turbulence decreased.

We now had a panoramic view of the landscape, the coast and the sea. The noise of the plane and its slow rate of speed (95 knots at the best of times) enabled many of the villagers below to wave frantically to us as we passed overhead. After about two hours flying we passed over Abau and, just short of Orangerie Bay, we spotted the trawler. On our estimations the trawler was well within the 12-mile limit — possibly no more than 6 miles off shore.

As the noise of the Tiger would have already alerted the crew of the trawler, we decided to descend to 500 feet and fly directly to the vessel. We would then sweep past and, if possible, identify the name and country of origin. The vessel was painted dark grey, although substantial amounts of rust suggested it had not returned to its home port for some time. Markings on the stern of the vessel suggested it was Japanese but the name on the bow was too stained by rust for clear identification.

John Arthur asked me to circle the trawler while he, sitting in the rear seat, brandished a .38 revolver in the direction of the trawler below. The crew were obviously fully aware of our intent as they lined up on the deck with their hands in the air. A rifle shot from any member of the crew could have proved disastrous for us but, fortunately, no effort was made to hinder our 'arrest'. After a number of passes, and with petrol running low (the Tiger carried only 19 gallons), we decided to head back

## NOT A TOOTHLESS TIGER

to Jackson's Strip and, en route, attempt to advise the crew of the CA70 of our findings.

When we found the CA70 it was still some distance from the Japanese trawler, even though it had made good time. By flying overhead, and on the same course as the CA70, we were able to drop an old canvas bag on the deck. Inside was a cryptic note advising them of the trawler's position and that, most likely, it was Japanese. Subsequently, Customs and Fisheries officers on board the CA70 were able to arrest the vessel and escort it back to Fairfax Harbour.

For us the morning's flight had been rewarding. Our usually toothless Tiger had displayed a small tooth. Later we learnt that questions had been asked in the Australian Parliament of the Minister of Civil Aviation, the Hon. H.sL. Anthony, whether there was any truth in the rumour that a Japanese fishing trawler had been arrested while fishing within the 12-mile limit, by the crew of a Departmental biplane who had brandished a weapon. The Minister responded that the matter was being pursued through diplomatic channels and he declined to elaborate.

Later that year John Arthur was awarded an OBE for the flying skills he had demonstrated in the aftermath of the Mount Lamington eruption of early 1951. Each morning he had flown the vulcanologist into the crater of Mount Lamington so that observations could be made. But I like to think that the flight in the one-toothed Tiger may also have contributed.



To show our Managing Director the prospecting work that came before a big comfortable exploration camp like Yandera, I took him out to a couple of the tiny log platforms on the sides of those stupendous gorges that served as helicopter pads for little fly camps, tiny specks of blue tents against the jungle, and the calls of faraway prospecting parties across the gorge below us. He was chastened. Then to fly home, since we had a high-altitude capacity in the Llama, and it was a beautiful day, we took him for a swing up and around the peak of Mount Wilhelm. It is spectacular jagged rock, and had only a little snow at that time of year. In times past it had small glaciers, as the highest peaks on the Indonesian side still do. So we flew peacefully past this top, and on the other side saw the most spectacular scenery I will ever see, amongst the most varied on earth. Close beside us in wisps of mist were ragged glacial peaks with mossy rocks and a dusting of snow, and two little glacial tarns with waterfalls between them. We could have been in high Scotland. Just below were giant slopes extending down to the dark jungle around the base of the mountain. But the peak rises out of the Highlands plateau, so stretching away were tens of thousands of neat green native gardens, the rich country towards Goroka in the distance. To the north of those were the great jungle ranges again, dropping off the edge of the plateau to the huge brown swathes of boulder beds and braided channels of the Ramu and Markham Rivers, in the rift valley. Behind them rose the black ranges of the mysterious Finisterres, 3,500 metres high and scene of lonely Australian heroism in the Second World War. The sea behind them was peaceful pale blue beneath the big white storm heads, and set in it were several island volcanoes, a line of white smoke drifting from Karkar. I guess geologists are more romantic than accountants, because I was more moved by all of this in one vista than he was. Perhaps we were again breaking the rules of how to look after an MD.

*Ross Fardon*

*... and then the engines stopped*

## **MONKEY OVER MENDI**

Bryant Allen

Much like life in general, aircraft accidents are usually the result of a series of small mistakes, which, if taken separately, cause only minor unhappiness. But taken together, one after the other, in just the right sequence, they can cause total catastrophe. On the day Gary Simpson nearly fell out of a Cessna 206 on the northern approaches to Mendi airstrip, the mistakes presumably had not been big enough or numerous enough to push the chance of Gary's demise to unity on that great big table of probabilities in the sky. Gary didn't fall out. However, a large number of people walking along the road towards the market thought that they had seen a large hairy 'monkey' waving to them out of an aeroplane weaving its way erratically towards Mendi. Dropping their net bags beside the road, many set off at a run back towards the airstrip to see if this creature would make a successful landing and, if he did not, to view the body.

The mistakes started a year or so earlier, when a survey of children in the Southern Highlands had identified the Nembi Plateau as a place in which they were particularly malnourished. The geological bones of the Southern Highlands are a series of limestone ridges and valleys running from northwest to southeast in a majestic 300-kilometre long curve. The flesh has been spewed from a number of huge volcanoes that have forced their way through the limestone. The Nembi Plateau, perched between the volcanoes Ambua and Gerowa in the west and Giluwe in the east, and above the lowlands to the southwest, retains its essentially limestone character; knife-edge ridges, tower karst, valleys pocked with sinkholes,

will o' the wisp rivers, and a people with a reputation for bloody-mindedness and belligerence. Most of the volcanic flesh that once covered the bones of the Nembi Plateau has been washed down the sinkholes, which is one of the reasons why growing food on the Plateau is harder than in other places.

Fifty years before Gary and I set out to fly over their fields and houses, the Nembis had given Jack Hides the worst of his many bad moments, and Jack's policemen had repaid the compliment with some old-fashioned payback, shooting up a house full of women and children which they had stumbled upon. Some of the older Nembi people still bore the scars of the bullet wounds they had received as children. Being attacked by itinerant spirits had done nothing to change a widely held Nembi opinion, resultant upon growing up in this rough country, that the rest of the world was up to no good. By good fortune, our dealings with the Nembi occurred at a time when they were giving the rest of the world the benefit of the doubt. The Australian *kiaps* in the 1950s had, somewhat ironically, enforced a peace on the Plateau with firearms, and a few years after the events described here, in the late 1980s, Papua New Guinea policemen were killing our newfound Nembi friends who refused to acknowledge their authority with combat rifles from helicopters like New Zealand hunters killing vermin deer.

It was hypothesised that the reason the Nembi children were so small and sickly was that they did not get enough to eat and that this, in turn, was the outcome of too many people producing too little sweet potato from tired and worn-out soils. It was decided that a multi-disciplinary team of an agronomist, a soil scientist, a geomorphologist and a social scientist should spend three weeks on the Plateau, together with a class of third-year geography students from the University of Papua New Guinea, to see if the sources of the problem could be uncovered. Gary Simpson had recently moved from the Southern Highlands to the National Planning Office in Port Moresby, where he was helping to manage a World Bank rural development project in the province. In preparation for this expedition, I flew to Mendi, met Gary and together we drove up to the Nembi Plateau. There we were warmly met by the people, who, although I am pretty sure they didn't understand what we

were on about, graciously agreed that they would like to participate in a review of their agricultural system. The only maps available were the 1 centimetre to 1 kilometre national topographic series and air photographs taken in the 1960s and 1970s at scales of 1:50 000 and 1:80 000. Neither were much use for a detailed look at agriculture. We urgently needed some recent, large-scale, air photographs.

Brian Mennis, a surveyor in the Department of Works, had pioneered taking photographs using a 35 mm single lens reflex camera from a light aircraft in Papua New Guinea, to help design road and bridge alignments. Brian had written a 'how-to-do-it' manual, based on his experiences. Ralph Ernst in the Department of Forests had used Mennis' techniques to photograph logging projects. Ralph had an aluminum bracket constructed that bolted onto the rear seat runners of a Cessna 206, the commonest single-engine light aircraft in use in Papua New Guinea at the time. The bracket had an arm, with the camera attached to the end, that folded into the aircraft for take-off, to avoid the camera being damaged by stones or mud flying from the nearby main undercarriage wheel, and to change film. It could then be unfolded after take-off to be clear of the aircraft and pointing vertically down. The camera, a motor-drive Nikon, was controlled by an electronic black box that regulated the number of exposures per minute needed to give an 80 per cent overlap required on the images to provide stereoscopy. The camera operator sat strapped to a seat, bolted on the same runners as the camera, next to the open door. A second person sat in the front of the aircraft with the pilot to navigate and to shout 'On' and 'Off' to the camera operator above the roar of the engine and the wind rushing past the open door. To achieve a photo scale of about 1:10 000 after enlarging the image from the 35 mm negative onto a standard-sized piece of photographic paper with a 50 mm focal length lens on the camera, required the plane to be about 2,500 feet above the ground.

To take photographs in this way the double rear doors of the Cessna had to be removed, a deflector strip fitted to the forward door hinges to stop the slipstream from blowing straight into the back of the aircraft and a small plate screwed across the flap cut-out switch located above the

forward door frame. The flap cut-out switch works like the light switch on a car door, except that instead of turning the light off when the door is shut, this switch prevents the flaps from being lowered if the door is open. If the forward rear door on a Cessna 206 is open and the flaps are lowered, they will hit the door and will be damaged.

I had flown a few times as an assistant to Ralph Ernst as camera operator and navigator to get some experience, and I reckoned I could take the required photographs of the Nembi Plateau using Ralph's camera and bracket. Gary and I returned from the Nembi Plateau to Mendi and went to discuss the proposal with John Wallis, the tall and shambling World Bank project team leader. When we arrived at John's office, he was talking with X from the National Mapping Bureau. The thought of an aerial survey, carried out by two total amateurs, clearly rankled with X. Although he had no first-hand experience of taking photos from a light aircraft, he was a qualified surveyor and believed anything to do with mapping or surveying should be left to the professionals. He would draw up the flight plans and come to Mendi to supervise the photography. John Wallis, who was not convinced that a bunch of 'bloody academic geographers' could do any good on the Nembi Plateau when the pride of the Territory's Department of Primary Industry had not even noticed there was a problem, agreed and enthusiastically volunteered to help him.

Mistake number one.

Disappointed, Gary and I returned to Port Moresby and awaited the air photos. About a month later, X phoned to say he had the prints, but that he was 'having a bit of trouble sorting them out'. Perhaps Gary and I, with our greater local knowledge of the landmarks on the Plateau, could help. We met that evening at my house. The prints were marked with film and exposure numbers. We began laying out the runs across the floor of my living room, print by print. The first run drifted slightly, probably due to a cross-wind. The second run had been flown on a reciprocal track and it drifted a bit more. The third run drifted even more, leaving a wide strip of unphotographed ground between it and the second run. The fourth run did not just drift. It started out about 20 degrees off line, swung steadily to the left until it was almost at 90 degrees

to the direction of the other runs, when it embarked on an almost perfect 180 degree loop to veer back across the other runs. The rest of the prints following apparently random tracks wandering across mostly unrecognisable rough bush country.

‘Who was navigating?’ I tentatively asked X, hoping it wasn’t him.

‘John was. He said he knew the Plateau well. Had worked up there as a young *didiman* or something,’ replied a very quiet X. ‘I operated the camera and had my head down most of the time. When we got back, John didn’t say much and the pilot seemed to be happy enough. Asked us if we got what we wanted and John just grunted.’

‘He’s been going round in circles,’ observed Gary helpfully. ‘Let’s have a beer.’ And he headed off towards the kitchen and my refrigerator.

The next day I phoned John Wallis in Mendi. A *didiman* from way back, John did not suffer fools easily and worked on the assumption that all academics are impractical fools until proved otherwise. I approached the conversation with some temerity.

‘Ah, John. We laid out the prints last night.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, there’s a bit of a problem with a couple of the runs.’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘Yes. They start off all right but then they sort of ...’ I frantically searched for a nice way of saying ‘go in circles’. ‘I wonder if you know what happened?’

‘I got completely ... lost, that’s what happened! It all looks the same when you get up there. When the plane slowed down, the nose came up and I couldn’t see a ... thing. But you can’t stop a plane and ask the kanakas where you are, so I just tried to cover the area as best I could.’

I was impressed at John’s honesty. Clearly his treatment of fools included himself when he felt he had been foolish enough. I decided not to mention the ‘going in circles’ bit. But we still needed some photographs that covered the area of the proposed survey.

‘Ah, John, these photos don’t cover the area that we need them to.’

‘I’m not surprised.’

A long pause.

‘Look. You’d better come up here and have a go yourself. You can’t do any worse than what I did. I’ll line up the MAF plane for next Wednesday. You can stay with the doctor. His missus has buggered off somewhere for a few days. What d’ya reckon?’

‘Yeah, right oh, John. Gary and I will give it a go. See you next week.’

Mistake number two.

All that week I poured nervously over Mennis’ manual and maps and photographs. John had eaten humble pie and I couldn’t afford to fail. I searched the old photographs with a stereoscope, looking for prominent features in the landscape with which to orientate myself and to use as aiming points for the aircraft. Flying on a compass bearing would not solve the problem of a cross-wind and in those days GPS receivers were found only in the nose cones of intercontinental ballistic missiles. I had decided to fly all the runs in the same direction. This would take longer and cost a bit more. It would allow us to fly a pattern familiar to the pilot, like the downwind and upwind legs of an approach to a runway. On the ‘downwind’ leg we would be able to reorientate ourselves and get the plane lined up and stable before we turned the camera on. It would also mean we would not have to change the film in the middle of a run. I plotted all the runs on an enlargement of the topographical map and also on a clear plastic overlay for the photographs and worked out the flying height required to give the appropriate above-ground distance. The plateau floor was at 1,600 metres above sea level. We would have to fly at around 7,800 feet. It would be cold up there with the doors off and the wind blowing in, even though we were only a few degrees from the Equator.

On the following Tuesday Gary and I flew from Port Moresby to Mendi. At the last minute I threw into my pack my Chinese imitation USAF quilted flying jacket, complete with a fur-lined hood and a pair of motorcycle goggles. I was worried about the cold at 8,000 feet. We called into the Missionary Aviation Fellowship hangar and discussed the plan

with the pilot, an American who called himself only 'Rick'. Rick was keen to do the job and said it would make a change from flying the milk runs around the local mission strips. We agreed to take off at 9.30 the next morning and to be over the plateau around 10am. Any earlier and there would be too much shadow and possibly mist in the valley bottoms. Any later, said Rick, and we would run into a cloud problem at around 7,000 feet, just below the height we needed to be at. In the Highlands, the cloud comes in every day about 11am, settles down halfway up the valley sides and just sits there preparing itself for the rain that falls every afternoon around 4 o'clock.

The next morning was one of those special Southern Highlands mornings, cold, but brilliantly clear, with the sun already sparkling off the dew-soaked grass and certain to soon burn off the mist lying across the airstrip. The limestone cliffs above the airstrip glowed in the morning sun and the roofs of houses perched high up on ledges on the valley sides oozed blue smoke, as their occupants tried to warm themselves and bake a few sweet potatoes for breakfast. By the time Gary and I got ourselves down to the airstrip, the mist was not preventing take-offs. Our plane had already left for Bosavi and was expected back around 9.15. We sat on the ground and Gary practised lifting the camera arm in and out and changing the film in the camera. We worked out a set of signals for turning the camera on and off. At 9.20 Rick taxied in, turned off, shouted some instructions to the refuellers and began pulling off the back doors, which he stacked against the wall of the hangar. He fitted the deflector strip and then excused himself to have a cup of coffee. Gary and I removed the rear seats from the plane, bolted the camera mount onto the seat runners and replaced the seat behind the camera. We extended a seatbelt that was already fixed to the floor so that it would go around the seat, and Gary. Gary was reluctant to put on the quilted jacket, but I insisted, arguing that it was going to be cold and he would not be able to move from his seat once we took off.

Rick returned, cast a cursory eye over the camera and seat and said, 'That looks okay. Let's go.'

Mistake number three.



We took off out of Mendi and were over the Nembi Plateau in about 15 minutes. My plans worked out well and we were able to do the appropriate number of runs over the study area in about 40 minutes. Going through 6,000 feet Gary had begun to experience the intense cold and had zipped up the jacket, pulled the fur-lined hood over his head and put on the goggles. His hands, left free to work the camera, were almost completely numb by the time he pulled the camera in for the last time and we turned back towards Mendi.

The job done, I relaxed and looked down over the spectacular landscape that I never tired of watching. Forested hog-back ridges, breathtakingly high cliffs, huge landslides, valley floors covered in closely planted sweet potato fields with houses scattered about, surrounded by casuarina trees. White rivers poured over boulders and swirled into dark long pools. All too soon, we skimmed around the end of the Mendi ridge and the town and airstrip appeared at the head of valley. We slipped beneath the cloud that was already coming rapidly down the slopes of Mount Giluwe to the east and descended steadily on a long downwind leg, parallel to the strip. To the north, above the town where the land rose steeply to meet us, Rick laid the Cessna over in a steep bank, straightened up, then banked again and lined up on the strip. He decreased the power, pushed the propeller onto fine pitch and eased the flap lever down to the 40 degree mark. The roar of the engine reduced and the propeller noise changed to a business-like tone. But the flaps stayed firmly up. The Cessna continued on towards the airstrip at 110 knots. Rick twigged what was wrong immediately.

‘Tell your friend to push the flap button in. Above the door!’ he shouted to me.

I realised that he had forgotten to fix the strip of metal across the flap cut-out switch to hold it down and so allow the flaps to operate.

MAF Cessnas have a full three-point harness in the front passenger seat but I had kept it fairly slack so I could turn and shout camera commands to Gary. I squirmed around as far as I could and shouted above the engine and the wind.

‘There’s a button above the door.’

‘A what?’

‘A button. Outside. Above the door.’

‘What about it?’

‘Push it in. Hold it in. The flaps won’t come down.’

Gary put his arm out the door, groping for a button that a few seconds before he had not known existed. The slipstream whipped his arm backwards. He tried again, forcing his numb fingers against the side of the aircraft, feeling about without success. With the end of the airstrip approaching fast, Rick gave up on us.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he shouted at me. ‘Hold on.’

He pressed firmly down on the right rudder and twisted the joystick over and sent the plane into a sudden, yawing skid so that we seemed to be crabbing sideways towards the runway. He then did the same thing with the left rudder. The nose of the plane swept flatly across the landscape until we were skidding towards the airstrip in the opposite direction.

Mistake number four.

It was during the third of these violent yawing side slips that Gary’s seat came off its runners.

For a second or two it seemed as if Gary was going to go out the door. He made a funny little squawking noise and flapped his arms frantically backwards as though he had decided to try and fly to the ground, but he was really trying to get his balance like a rodeo rider on a wild bull. I lunged over the seat back and caught his left arm as it went past and he gripped on like Tarzan, his right arm still circling out the door. Rick, unaware of the drama in the back, straightened up the now-slowed Cessna, touched it down gently on the end of the runway and let it rumble its way towards the MAF hangar. Gary did not let go of my arm until the aircraft had come to a complete halt and the engine had been switched off. If there had been a hostess on board, she would have been proud of us.

It took me some time to scramble out over Rick’s seat and run around to the other side of the plane. Gary was still sitting on his seat, loose

between the runners, next to the open door, in the fur-lined hood and the goggles. I couldn't decide whether it was the cold or the terror that made him sit so still. By the time I had undone the seatbelt and helped him out onto the tarmac, the fastest of the market-goers had arrived from the end of the airstrip and they were excitedly pointing at the monkey emerging from the plane.

The monkey said, 'Shit!'

'You're supposed to wait until the plane lands to get out,' I said.

'Piss off,' was the monkey's terse reply.

Warming up fast, the 'monkey' pulled off its big eyes and began to peel off its skin. The now-growing crowd buzzed with excitement, but when Gary emerged from my jacket and hood, they began laughing at their mistake and calling out.

'Masta. Mi lukim yu, na mi tingting wanpela monki i raun antap long balus.'

'Yeah, well you're bloody lucky the monkey didn't fall on your head,' muttered Gary, mostly to himself.

*Postscript:* In the afternoon Gary and I developed the films in the hospital lab where the X-ray films are developed. That night we enlarged the prints in the high school darkroom and the following day we drove out to Nembu and showed them to the people there. After a quick tutorial on photographs from the sky, they began picking out their own houses and gardens. They seemed to carry maps of the landscape in their heads.

'We saw you up there yesterday,' they said. 'You white men are very clever.'

'Yes, almost too bloody clever,' muttered Gary.

*... and then the engines stopped*

## **AND WHERE ARE WE NOW?**

Susan W. Serjeantson

The cloud was so thick and so low, I doubted that the plane would come that day. John and I were sitting on our boxes at Kiunga airstrip, waiting for an Unevangelised Field Mission (UFM) plane that made a monthly Daru–Kiunga–Telefolmin–Wewak run. It was a rare chance to get to the north coast. We had to get on that flight, whatever the weather!

The Cessna 185 suddenly dropped through the cloud and onto the strip. There was already one passenger aboard, sitting beside the pilot. John and I got in the back.

‘No trouble finding us then?’ asked John, who knew from experience that it was difficult to locate Kiunga in the heavy, low cloud that often blankets the Western Province. The young pilot and the middle-aged passenger glanced at each other but said nothing.

After take-off, the pilot unfolded a map onto his lap, and before long, dropped down through the cloud to not much above the tree tops.

‘What’s that place?’ asked the passenger. The pilot peered at the map.

‘I’m not sure,’ he said. ‘I don’t think it’s marked.’

John and I rolled our eyes at each other. Didn’t he know Rumginae Unevangelised Field Mission when he saw it?

‘That’s Rumginae,’ I said. The pilot and passenger ignored me.

‘I’ll track the Palmer River,’ said the pilot as he banked north-east, clearly hopelessly lost. Why did the passenger keep asking him where we were? We were at a ridiculously low altitude, that’s where we were! Didn’t the

pilot know we'd run into the Olsobip Wall, the sheer cliffs of the Star Mountains, if he didn't get this plane up?

The Star Mountains rise almost vertically out of the rainforest floor in the south, to the spectacular Mount Aiyang at 3,500 metres, and Capella at 4,000 metres, impossible altitudes for a small, unpressurised plane. The only route to the north was through the Olsobip Gorge, to Telefolmin. The Olsobip Gorge is a notorious horror trip, terrifying in the best of circumstances, but in heavy cloud with a UFM pilot who couldn't recognise his own mission when he saw it, it was too much!

The young pilot was intensely studying the map, trying to line up an approach to the Gorge.

'And where are we now?' asked the passenger. 'Have you spotted the Gorge?'

The pilot didn't reply, sweating now, peering through the windscreen then back to his map. He pulled up through the cloud and headed straight for the Wall. His concentration was intense and we dared not speak. The passenger stopped asking 'where are we now?'

I prepared to die, as one sometimes does on Papua New Guinea flights. Dying by the grace of God was one thing, but dying at the hands of an incompetent was something else. We came closer and closer to the Wall. There was no turning back, no going up. This was it.

Suddenly we were in the Gorge. The sheer beauty, the sheer relief! You could put out your hand and touch its magnificent walls. We pulled out of the Gorge and were above Telefolmin.

The middle-aged passenger took the map from the pilot's lap and slowly folded it away.

'Well done,' he said. 'You won't need an instructor next time.'

*... and then the engines stopped*

## **I MAY HAVE CHEATED A BIT**

Luca Cavalli-Sforza

In 1967 it was not yet clear if Kuru was, or was not, an inherited disease, as it was believed at first, or a viral one, as Carleton Gajdusek had already suggested. I had managed to get my travel to Australia paid for, and I thought I would take the opportunity to visit Papua New Guinea. I discussed it with my wife, who at the time did not like planes, but in the fight between curiosity and timidity, the first won. After a pleasant tour of major Australian cities and universities, we flew to Port Moresby, then to Goroka, from where we could charter a small plane to a little airstrip near Okapa, the 'capital of Kuru'. I had had a thorough briefing and travelling instructions from Carleton, and found John Mathews<sup>1</sup> who was then the medical officer in charge of Kuru research waiting at the airport to take us to Okapa. We knew the only chance of a place to stay would be at John Mathew's house, and we received most charming hospitality.

Kuru, a nasty neurological disease responsible for a progressive, uncontrollable loss of muscular coordination, was known to be always fatal with final paralysis and death. In 1967, when we went to Okapa, it already seemed likely that it was due to a virus, passed mostly from parents to children at the time of funerals, when children, but more often women, expressed their devotion to their dead parents by intimate nose to nose contact, and in other ways, including ceremonial necrophagy. Because of this custom, the disease was transmitted within

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<sup>1</sup> Professor John Mathews is now Head of the National Centre for Disease Control, Department of Health and Aging, Canberra.

the family simulating a genetic disease, and, in fact, the hypothesis made earlier that Kuru was a genetic disease had not yet been proved wrong.

When the viral theory was first proposed and the possible mechanism of viral transmission suggested, the hope was generated that the disease would soon disappear with disappearance of the unusual habits of intimate contact with dead relatives. But the Fore, the people among whom the epidemic had started, did not want to abandon their ceremonial custom. Patients were able to diagnose their own disease before the doctors could, and knew their fate very well, but filial duties are filial duties and who are these white guys who think they know better than your ancestors and want you to change your ancient ways?

When we arrived to Okapa, the necrophagy habits and other dangerous practices of the funeral rite were in full swing. It was only later that persuasion was effective and the disease disappeared, potentially confirming the viral theory. But I still remember distinctly seeing at least one patient, a little woman, walking around with difficulty and supporting herself with a stick, who showed the full series of symptoms proving the partial destruction of her coordination abilities, including an episode of involuntary, uncontrollable laughter.

While we were in Okapa, I wanted to visit some other tribes and test the possibility of using a questionnaire I had employed elsewhere, and which should inform me about migration. It was an opportunity to see a little more of the Highlands from the air and flying at a low altitude would allow a very good view of the rare settlements. A pilot came punctually to the little airstrip, the closest (about four hours by jeep) to Okapa. It was, naturally, a single-engine plane, and the three of us — my wife, John Mathews and myself — were the passengers. The airport was very short, maybe 700 or 800 feet, and as a half-baked pilot, I knew enough to understand the problems of short take-offs and landings. However, a gentle slope very opportunely increased our chance of making it before the airstrip ended. Before letting us into the plane, the pilot inquired about our weight. John Mathews was very lean; my wife was also light; I was middle weight and I felt it necessary to be, say, optimistic about my own weight and that of my briefcase. Did I cheat about it? In my

defence, I usually don't know my exact weight. Moreover, I felt quite confident about the width of the limit of tolerance of the plane. The pilot must have felt reassured, and the take-off was quite elegant. In fact, flying over the many hills and the few trees, he enjoyed staying very close to the ground.

We first landed at an even smaller airstrip, up a stronger slope than before. The name of the town was Ononewara, as a poster indicating somewhat emphatic directions to the non-existing customs house informed us. A little distance from the airstrip was the cosy cottage of the police, and the only policeman, an Australian, was there to greet us. A few Papua New Guineans waited for us smiling, showing off their beautiful teeth and the even more beautiful necklaces of circular pig teeth that adorned their necks. From the airport, a road of a few kilometres, the only one in the region, led to a little village, and there was a jeep which had been built, we were told, by carrying its pieces a few at a time in the only twin-engine plane that could make it — a push-pull with two engines mounted above the fuselage with one propeller pulling and the other, behind, pushing.

The pilot warned us that we had to leave early, before noon, because the wind might change direction. If it did, we might not make it. The take-off was, of course, on the same slope, but this time down, and at the end of the slope there was an abyss, the bottom of which could not be seen from where we departed. Later I learnt that a colleague had been in an accident on a similarly short airstrip — ours was maybe 200 metres long — and the plane did not make it. He spent the night under the body of the pilot, who had a broken spine. Chances are relief planes would not be able to spot you in that vast sea of hills and holes, but they were lucky and were picked up the next day by a helicopter.

Our trip had two more stops and the work went well. In Menyamyama I made inquiries on migration, and the only discomfort was that one of those big birds, a cassowary, was walking in the village, throwing around nasty looks. I decided I would not look at it, having the idea that if I saw him looking at me the way he was looking at others it would be very difficult not to return a nasty look, probably an unwise thing to do. He



had an impressively powerful beak and a very long neck. But his weapons were really his nails, and these birds were known to have killed people. When I look back several years afterwards at photos taken in Menyama, however, the big bird seems smaller than I remembered.

On the last leg of our trip, a gentle fog started forming at the horizon in the direction in which we were going and where presumably our little airstrip lay. It certainly had no radar or other aids to navigation. As we were flying the fog became thicker. The pilot opened a bag and pulled out a map. My wife touched my elbow, but it was obviously better to avoid any comment. A few minutes later, the pilot started shuffling the map again, this time more nervously. It happened again and again.

As you can guess, we made it. But I could not help thinking that while for us it was just one experience in a lifetime, for the poor pilot it must have been a frequent occurrence.

... and then the engines stopped

## FEAR AND LOATHING IN NUKU STATION

Colin Filer<sup>1</sup>

Where is the safest place to stay in Wewak? The Boram Kalabus. Also quite cheap if you happen to have a *wantok* — or in my case a *tambu* — numbered amongst the warders. No beachfront, true, but there is a hill that tastefully conceals the cell blocks from the warders' housing compound. And the gaol is but a short walk from the airport. Which is where I landed on 29 June 1992, in a Twin Otter whose fuselage bore a number of small dents. I apologised to the pilot (did he laugh or merely shrug his shoulders?) and headed for my second sanctuary, walking rather faster than I might have done in other circumstances. Paranoid electionitis is a strange disease, but in this case I had no one but myself to blame.

Three nights had passed since the same Twin Otter, then undented, landed me at Nuku Station, the capital (if such it can be called) of Nuku Open Electorate. And almost 20 years had passed since I first arrived at Nuku Station on a second-hand mission motorbike, looking for a place to do the fieldwork which would count as my initiation to the discipline of Social Anthropology. The place I found was one of the five villages of the Namblo language group, where I was adopted by the family of a man I had met in Port Moresby, the diminutive Franciscan Brother Cosmas.

In those days, Nuku was commanded by a *kiap* called Karl Kitchens, an Australian cowboy who claimed descent from a native American, and

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<sup>1</sup> This story is dedicated to the memory of Father Fabian Thom, the priest in charge of Nuku Catholic Mission during the 1970s, who was murdered in his bed at the Franciscan seminary outside Port Moresby on 17 August 2001.

who liked to call my adopted native brother 'Brother Cosmos'. By the time I left Nuku in 1974, Brother Cosmas had quit the Order of the Friars Minor, reverting to his prior Christian name of Christopher, together with the Namblo name of Sambre. Little did Mr Kitchens know that *sambre* was the Namblo word for 'making fun', nor did Mr Sambre know why Mr Kitchens subsequently changed his name to Mr Stack when he elected to become a citizen of Papua New Guinea. But Messrs Stack and Sambre did get to know each other a lot better when they both joined the Pangu Pati, and were both elected to Parliament in 1977 — Stack as the Member for West Sepik Province, Sambre as the Member for Nuku. Both were re-elected in 1982, and again in 1987, by which time Namblo members of the Pangu campaign team had changed the names of Stack and Chris into 'Steak and Grease', the better to convey the natural quality of their political alliance.

But now, in 1992, Stack had decided to quit politics and go back to Australia. Chris therefore stood with little more than token backing from his erstwhile ally, and he was in for a tough test of his political longevity. For the first time, another Namblo candidate was standing against him. In fact, there were two other Namblo candidates standing against him, though one was really standing with him, in order to split the vote which would otherwise go to the other one, who really was standing against him, because he was standing on behalf of another candidate from the Seim language group, in order to split the Namblo vote which would otherwise all go to Chris, as it had done in the past. Of course, Chris had a second Seim candidate lined up to split the Seim vote as well, and there were several other candidates from the two dozen other language groups that populated the electorate. But the bits of human political machinery which were littered around Nuku airstrip on the date of my arrival all knew the shape of the main contest. And the bits that belonged to the sitting member knew that the Leader of the Opposition, Andrew Kumbakor, was a bit of a bother, because he was the first Seim candidate to get serious support outside his own language group. Some of this support came from Sambre's Namblo language group, and there were a lot more Seim voters than Namblo voters.

Such were the facts which I could glean from the hubbub that greeted my arrival in Nuku Station on the morning of 26 June. My first move had been the short but familiar walk from the airstrip to the house of the sitting Member. There I found a number of candidates and scrutineers engaged in debate about the Returning Officer's decision to remove the counting of the vote from Nuku Station to Lumi Station, which is located in the neighbouring Lumi-Aitape Open Electorate. This small crowd then joined a larger crowd of candidates and scrutineers that wanted the Returning Officer to state his reason for the move. The Returning Officer declared his lack of faith in the generator which supplied power to the Nuku Local Government Council Chambers. This fooled no one. Trouble was expected. And the scrutineers (if not the candidates) were now obliged to make their way by road to Lumi Station, and might well face unfriendly forces on the way, or even more unfriendly forces on the way back, if their own candidate were to win the count.

Perhaps the Returning Officer was hoping that they would not even bother to make the trip. If so, he was wrong. But I was bothered by the thought of bouncing around in the back of a Landcruiser for several hours. And I possessed a trump card, which was a letter, signed by the Electoral Commissioner himself, to prove that I had come to watch the counting of the votes in a purely academic capacity. This caused the Returning Officer to take me quite literally under his wing, by inviting me to board the chartered Islander which was about to transport the big red pile of Nuku ballot boxes to their new home at Lumi. So I cheerfully waved goodbye to the assembled candidates and scrutineers, and settled into my new role as an honoured guest of the provincial administration.

Fifteen minutes later, Nuku's numbers came to rest on Lumi airstrip. All other numbers were in short supply. Lumi Station slept as soundly as it did on any other day. No crowd of scrutineers disturbed the silence with their speculative murmurings. The Council Chambers were deserted. Many sunny hours were still available for the Returning Officer and his team to assemble the trappings of their nocturnal business. While they were testing the power supply with a tea ceremony in the kitchen,

I staked a claim to an empty room in the least accessible corner of the building, unpacked my rucksack, blew up my air mattress, and settled down for a comfortable doze with a good book.

The declining sun saw the camp followers from Nuku regathering and loitering, without much obvious intent, around the desks and chairs and ropes and blackboards which were very slowly being turned into the trappings of the count. Some time after sunset, the human and material assemblage had the shape required for the Returning Officer to start the process. With a fine sense of timing, he and I and other elite members of his task force promptly leapt aboard a Landcruiser and drove off to Lumi High School, which possessed the only satellite dish and television set in Lumi District, and got there just in time to watch the rugby league test match between Australia and Great Britain. And when the old colonial masters lost the game, the mood of my companions was much improved. Their jollity was shared by the swollen throng of 'supporters' who had joined the policemen, tally clerks and scrutineers to listen to the radio broadcast of the match in the Lumi Council Chambers. Indeed, the numbers chalked up on the blackboards showed that little progress had been made in counting votes while everyone was following another score.

It felt good to be British that night. It made up for the fact that I was the only white man in sight. I and all these Papua New Guineans had something in common. Australia had been beaten. The long night of number crunching became a post-match celebration. At least for a while. The numbers were bound to win out in the end. Count 1, Count 2, Count 3, three o'clock in the morning and still less than 3,000 votes chalked up under the names of the Nuku Open candidates. Too early to tell the winner, because each count contained the votes from one group of ballot boxes, which meant one group of villages, and each group of villages had its own political peculiarities. At four o'clock I gave up waiting for Counts 3 and 4 to translate themselves from visible piles of ballot papers to visible numbers on the Nuku blackboard, and I went to bed. But then my sleep was disturbed by the silhouettes of people opening 'my' bedroom door and dumping metal boxes on 'my' bedroom floor. And in the intervals, I dreamt that I awoke to find that there had

been a blackout in the night, the blackboard had been wiped clean, and a mingled crowd of counters, scrutineers and supporters had started recounting the votes in a manner reminiscent of the occupants of Kafka's Castle.

At seven o'clock I got up, did a quick stretch, and opened the door to find out what was really going on. On the other side I found a small knot of policemen who were not standing at ease. They clearly wanted to evict me from my temporary habitat. And then it dawned. Their problem was my problem. For beyond the rope which separated the supporters from the counters who were still just managing to count the votes, and those few scrutineers who were officially allowed to scrutinise their weary motions, a hundred angry eyes were boring into those of us who clustered round the suspect door. Behind me, in that room, were the ballot boxes which contained the votes which had been counted while I slept and woke and dreamt and woke again. And what had I been doing to those ballot papers which these officers had so considerably put to sleep beside me? A glance at the scoreboard showed that Counts 6 and 7, my noble but irritating roommates, had given Sambre a significant advantage over the rest of the field. And this was no joke.

The Returning Officer put on a brave show of rationality, regaling the hundred angry ears with my letter of endorsement from the Electoral Commissioner. This caused 50 angry mouths to talk about things like citizenship and underdevelopment, but not to exonerate me from my imputed sins. The Returning Officer therefore proposed that I should remove myself and my rucksack to the safe haven of the Catholic Mission.

The mission station's pair of stationmasters were Australian Franciscans, aging members of a dwindling priesthood which had formerly controlled the great majority of local souls, but had since lost growing numbers of their flock to numerous varieties of fiery Protestant belief. If these Minor Friars were besieged by muscular Christians, was there something Christian, muscular or just mysterious about the motivations of the crowd from which I now sought sanctuary? And what about the former Brother, my adopted brother, the Sitting Member? Was he, like us, condemned for his association with the relics of outmoded orthodoxy or

the vanished forces of colonial administration? Such were the topics of our breakfast conversation.

By tea-time I was none the wiser. The Nuku count had been suspended for the day, the Returning Officer had made himself scarce, and the crowd of supporters had broken into its factional components to sleep, gossip, grumble or conspire. At five o'clock the crowd reassembled itself to await the return of the Returning Officer. I mingled unproductively, but could at least detect that many members of the crowd were not my enemies. The Returning Officer returned with the falling of the dusk. A speech was called for, and a speech was duly made. The Returning Officer conceded that he really ought to have done a better job of explaining my presence to the scrutineers and other supporters. But he was not prepared to accept the argument that I had applied either 'Black Power' or 'Alpha Power' to the votes contained in Counts 6 and 7. His superiors in the provincial capital had therefore recommended that the count should continue, but that I should be removed from the scene of the action. Would the crowd agree to this arrangement?

The first answer to his question was a combination of shouting and murmuring which made no sense at all. The next answer was a handwritten list of demands which included one demand for a recount and another demand for my prompt imprisonment. The crowd was asked to indicate its level of support for these demands. Thankfully, opinion was divided. And the Returning Officer's temper was starting to fray around the edges. He told his audience that everyone was tired and emotional, they should just get on with the business of counting the votes, and the losing candidates could take their complaints to court when the count was over. So the crowd was persuaded to adjourn to the Council Chambers, while two policemen escorted me back to my holy sanctuary.

So that was it. Black Power and Alpha Power. Key to the whole episode. But what the hell did my enemies think they were? Or my friends for that matter? Or the Holy Fathers?

What had actually happened, during the course of the election campaign, was that supporters of the Namblo candidate who was

attempting to split the Namblo vote for the benefit of the leading Seim candidate, Andrew Kumbakor, had spread the rumour that Christopher Sambre could only retain his seat by means of this magic substance. Or else, if you believe the other side, then Sambre's own supporters had been boasting that this magic substance was their secret weapon. In either case, the rumour mill did not predict the means by which the stuff would work. Not until that fateful morning when an unwary anthropologist was caught with his trousers down in the company of Counts 6 and 7. Then all had been revealed.

But not to the anthropologist. No one, friend or enemy, had wanted to divulge the way in which my advent had been pre-configured. All I knew was that I stood accused of practising this strange form of electoral sorcery. I imagined the newspaper headline: 'White Man Uses Black Power to Rewrite Votes in Key Marginal'. It did not make a lot of sense. Neither to me nor to the Holy Fathers. They had not heard the rumours either. But politics was not their scene. And now I had no other company. The priests brought word of Sambre's victory when they returned from Holy Mass next morning. By which time, Lumi was its normal Sunday self. The scrutineers and supporters had all packed up and gone home. Or gone somewhere else. That night, after dinner, the priests and I reclined in ancient Franciscan cane chairs and listened to an ancient Franciscan radio crackling news of distant vote counts sealing sitting members' fates across the countryside. And in my sleep, I dreamt the Latin voices of apocalyptic horsemen bearing word of ghastly massacres on feudal battlefields. St Francis had consumed, if not absolved, the black magician in his home. How would that sound in the Court of Disputed Returns?

Never mind. My immediate problem was how to get out of this place. The problem after that was where to go. Here was a bright and sunny Monday morning. We'd had baked beans for breakfast, washed down with that rather horrid instant coffee which bears witness to Franciscan vows of poverty. It was time to get a grip on my destiny. I strolled along to the airstrip, looking for signs of deliverance. There was my police escort, no longer concerned to keep me out of the Lumi action, because there was no Lumi action, but strongly of the view that I should not



return to Nuku, where trouble was reportedly afoot. This news was echoed by the mission radio schedule: roadblocks on the Lumi–Nuku road, and a mass of angry Kumbakorians blockading Nuku Station. The policemen clearly had a point. To Wewak I would go.

That day, Talair sent its skyborne chariot from Wewak to Lumi, thence to Vanimo, thence back to Lumi, thence to Aitape, busily evacuating the custodians of public order whose presence had been summoned by my supernatural powers. By four o'clock, the plane was back in Lumi to evacuate the cause of all the trouble.

I never did like Lumi Station all that much. Too flat and featureless. Now that it had become the site of my least successful piece of fieldwork, I was relieved to take my leave. In so far as it is possible to settle into a Twin Otter passenger seat, I did that. The stewardess told the passengers how to behave if the plane fell into the sea, and then retired to her own back seat, where she would normally serve no other useful purpose. I studied the view from my lonely left-hand window seat, expecting to see the peaks of the Torricelli Mountains loom closer as we flew directly east to Wewak. But they grew more distant. We were veering to the south.

'How come?' I asked the stewardess.

'We're just touching down in Nuku to pick up the mail.'

Ah yes, the mail. No doubt a sackful of complaints addressed to the Electoral Commissioner. Or maybe a packet of Alpha Power to prove my guilt. Was this really necessary?

Soon the plane was banking to the left, then skimming the corrugated rooftops of Wati Catholic Mission before it sank down to the bottom of the upward-sloping airstrip where my Nemesis unknowingly awaited me. Or had they been tipped off?

As the plane grumbled to a halt, the nose swung round to the right, providing me with an excellent view of the mob which was indeed besieging the government office block beyond the north end of the strip. Some members of the crowd were staring at the aircraft. I smiled and waved at them. This was a bad move. A cry went up. The crowd began to heave itself in our direction. Not smiling. Waving weapons.

I glance back. Step door is down. Mailbag coming up perhaps? Who cares? Engines still running. Make for the cockpit.

‘Er, excuse me, captain, that mob wants to murder me. Can we get out of here?’

No worries. Stewardess hauls up the doorstep. Engines full throttle. Quick right turn and full speed down the runway.

I now lay flat on my back in the aisle of the aircraft, hearing the thud of unseen weapons biting at the fuselage. Who could know that none of these were bullets? And why on earth were the other passengers so unmoved? Perhaps the pair of waspish Protestant missionary ladies planted in the pair of seats adjacent to my left knee had seen it all before. One glanced out of the window, turned to her companion, and remarked upon the restlessness of the natives. The second lady cast a quizzical frown at the failed political scientist cowering in the gangway. I reassured her: ‘It’s OK, they’re just trying to kill me.’

Perhaps I should have emphasised the last word. But now the plane was off the ground, the thuds had ceased, perhaps no further explanation was required. Time instead for the stewardess to perform another of her necessary functions.

‘Excuse me, sir, could you please return to your seat and fasten your seatbelt?’

Yes, princess, anything you say.

It must have been 1970. We were returning to Port Moresby from Mount Hagen after attending the Mount Hagen Show. I climbed into the cabin space of a DC3 and made my way up the sloping aisle to a seat beside a young Highland man. As I settled my bag as best as possible 'under the seat in front', I noticed that my seat companion had placed a rather firm-looking sugar bag in the middle of the confined floor space. It was about a third of a metre high and roughly the same in diameter. The flight proceeded, and after some time either my leg or the sugar bag shifted a little. I became aware that my leg was pressing against the hessian bag, and that both my leg and the contents of the bag were curiously cool. About this point my neighbour informed me that the bag contained a live python which he was taking to sell in Port Moresby. I edged my leg cautiously away from the cabin baggage, which by now was showing signs of rippling movement, and kept a discreet distance between me and my neighbour for the rest of the flight!

*Marion Ward*

*... and then the engines stopped*

## **SHOT IN OUR HONOUR**

Rosemary Preston

In the mid-1980s, with the adoption of decentralisation policies, the government of Papua New Guinea was encouraging community initiatives to improve the quality of primary schooling in rural areas. I was travelling to various parts of the country to monitor their development. This included a trip to the then West Sepik border with Irian Jaya in October of 1986. Accompanied by a British counterpart working for the West Sepik Development Project in Vanimo, the intention was to visit Wasengla, a frontier mission serving Waris-speaking communities, some 20 minutes by air from Vanimo. There, the school parents and teachers association had been given a government grant to build dormitories. Modelled on the original colonial school system, the purpose was to improve school enrolment and attendance rates.

As Indonesia's easternmost province, Irian Jaya had been experiencing civil unrest and tension between the Melanesian West Papuan people and their Javanese administrators since the early 1960s. Through the 1980s, West Papuan refugees fled Irian Jaya and were given asylum in camps along the PNG side of the border. In 1986, there were some 16,000 refugees in 16 camps, half in West Sepik and half along the Fly River, in Western Province to the south. From time to time there were Indonesian military incursions from border military posts into these areas and occasional skirmishes with refugee groups and PNG forces.

Passages from my diary record the story of my attempt to reach Wasengla.

*Monday 6th October*

We took off in clear skies from Vanimo but, heading for Wasengla, we were quickly above thick cloud, with very few holes through which to go down. Over honeycomb mountains, it was quickly obvious that the pilot was lost. Sweat dripped down the back of his neck, as we circled for 20 minutes, then another 20, as the fuel level dropped. Eventually there was a hole, big enough for it to seem safe to go below the cloud without hitting a mountain. More circling, until eventually there was what looked like an airstrip. None of us noticed the flag before we landed. It seemed abandoned: the grass was long and the windsock was in need of repair. Then we hit the ground, bounced back, ten feet into the air, and down again and up again and again, and stopped, slewed at an angle off the end of the strip in the *kunai* grass, a few feet from the trees. Some message in my head reminded me that in plane crashes you are supposed to put your head down. When I uncurled, I found that I had the arm of my Papua New Guinean neighbour clinging to me. Climbing out, outside myself, everything was in slow motion. It was like a film to see men in shorts and tee-shirts, or simply wrapped in a towel, stand up out of the *kunai* grass. All wore red bandanas knotted round their heads. All carried machine guns. Very slowly, I realised that we were on the wrong side of the border.

The airstrip lay along the bottom of a narrow valley with mountains on all sides. Small clusters of houses could be seen above on nearby ridges. From the start, although underneath things were unsure, on the surface the men were friendly. They took photographs of us with them, and we did too. The mission pilot walked back down the length of the strip with a group of people. The rest of us stayed by the plane. My British counterpart and I made sign conversation with the men bustling around the plane, trying to discover where we were. Eventually, with the help of the pilot's map, we learned that we were in Ubrub, some way to the southwest of Wasengla.

The Papua New Guineans who had come with us, three adults and two children, were scared. Only two had climbed out of the plane. The pilot worried about weight, the bumpy landing strip and take-off and was

unwilling to attempt a take-off with everyone on board. Fearful for the safety of the Papua New Guineans if we left them with the Indonesian militias, I said that he should leave with them, and come back later to fetch us. I thought that the Indonesians would be less likely to harm two Europeans, as it would threaten an international crisis of some kind. Even then I knew in another part of my mind that there might be diplomatic difficulties that would prevent either the plane's departure and/or its return. The Indonesians were unhappy at the suggestion of us remaining behind, but eventually everyone understood the weight problem and the two of us stayed. We were glad that we did. We all pulled the plane back on to the strip. It taxied over the uneven grass and made the air at the very end, banking steeply to avoid a mountain. I'm not at all sure that there was any consultation about the legality of this.

We were taken from the airstrip to a military base, with no luggage, only my small *bilum* with writing materials and camera. We still didn't know if we were in the hands of Indonesians or Free Papua Movement [OPM], but guessed it was Indonesians because there were Javanese among them. We were all friendly, but neither side knew what the outcome would be. We were all in the hands of other people in faraway places who'd never heard of, let alone been to, Ubrub. We were given hot water to drink and lunch and dinner by the army. Two chickens were shot in our honour.

At first, they told us the plane had been given approval to return. When it didn't come, they said that someone's mind had changed. I didn't feel this to be a let-down because it hadn't necessarily been true in the first place. A priest arrived in a Cessna from Jayapura in the middle of the afternoon. He didn't look our way as he walked up the hill to his house. His plane left. We learned gradually that we were being jointly hosted by the Indonesian army and police. On Monday, it was the army's turn. Sleeping arrangements were provided by the police and on Tuesday we were to be their guests, but there were no uniforms, no insignia. All the men were young, most under 30, intelligent. There were about 20 of them. My counterpart played chess. He beat the Chief of Police Jilalahi, but lost to the army leader, whose name we didn't learn. It was hair-cutting day, so he had his done as well. By mid-afternoon, we were told

that police were expected from Jayapura to question us, decide our fate, and take us with them. We were given permission from the army officer to go and talk to the priest. We walked the 200 metres to his house. We were with him for five minutes, when the police thumped on the door with their rifle butts and told us that it was out of bounds. They hustled us out at gunpoint.

*Tuesday 8th October*

I was scared in the night. One of the Melanesian soldiers, behind me in the single file to the sleeping quarters, had said in *tok pisin*, 'Whatever you do, don't open the door'. We were offered a small room with an adobe sleeping platform. Later we learned that it was the chief of police's bedroom. To my consternation, my counterpart protested at the prospect of spending the night in a small room with me, so the police gave us a room each. The army donated a mattress and they gave us the key to the flimsy doors. There were patrols every three hours to make sure we were still there. The dazzling torchlight through the windows was worrying. I felt vulnerable, but there were no disturbances. In the morning, it was with mixed feelings that I found that the Chief of Police had spent the night, sprawled on a piece of cardboard, on the concrete floor outside my door.

We thought a lot about how the pilot was coping. We thought too of the people who would be pulling strings to get us out. We didn't think until later of all the others whose plans were being disrupted by the incident.

We were greeted with tankards of sweet coffee, at 5.30 am Irian Jayan time. We were given every chance to wash, with soap, towels, and even toothbrushes. Such detail, in otherwise rudimentary surroundings, almost made peeing in the river at the point of a bayonet seem trivial. Invited to wash my clothes, the young Javanese policeman lent me a clean shirt and entertained me in the river teaching me *bahasa*. He was charming. It was a pity that we couldn't communicate better, and I didn't want to imagine what he might be like under less amiable instructions. He took us to visit the village school, as special visitors.

Later we were expecting a helicopter to take us to Jayapura, but the cloud grew heavy and it didn't come. At lunchtime it rained. At 3.00 in

the afternoon we were walking up a track with the chief of police to ask the Dutch priest to translate our travel permits for the flight to Jayapura. We'd turned in to the police house to change into my own shirt and get my bag so that I could surrender the film from my camera, when a small plane was heard, very high. It circled down. There was alarm among the men when no one recognised it. They said it came from PNG, but my counterpart and I were still disoriented and hadn't worked out which direction that was. The Indonesians were worried. We said that we would do what we were told and stayed by the river with one policeman as our minder. After a while, they all came back from the strip with the mission pilot. If he was relieved to see that we were well, I don't think he saw the implications of the fact that the landing was not authorised, another variant in the complicated game. The Indonesians were perplexed. They'd had no warning and the pilot had no permit, nor any flight number. We waited while they sent messages from the radio station. After half an hour, to everyone's relief, it was confirmed. The unrecorded flight had been permitted by the Indonesian and Papua New Guinean ministries for foreign affairs. The police prepared another travel warrant, this time for us to leave Irian Jaya, and took an hour to type it. We were free to go. More photographs, lots of handshakes and off. Ubrub disappeared below us, an isolated outpost in the jungle. Its dilapidated Dutch hospital and hill-top priest's house, its sheet metal barracks and breeze-block police quarters became smaller. The perforated windsock barely fluttered on the over grown, lumpy airfield.

*Wasengla, Friday 10th October*

Now, after several days, we know how many people were affected by our visit to Ubrub. As we landed in Vanimo, we were confronted by PNG police, army and border unit staff. They wanted to debrief us on everything that had happened that might have political or military implications. They did not see our exhaustion, but eventually we asked them to let us go.

We came to Wasengla yesterday, to meet the people who began to live through it all with us when the plane failed to arrive here on Monday morning. There was a level of understanding between us that did not



require things to be said. We learned that a nurse from the mission had been unable to go to Kambi. A priest from Adelaide had not reached Wasengla. Another had not made it to Leitri. We learned of contingency arrangements to ensure our safety if there was a decision to let us return. Douglas had flown fuel to Kambi, anticipating a possible emergency flight from there. Someone had booked tickets for us on the weekly Air Niugini flight from Jayapura, when they heard we were to be taken there. We saw that a lot of people had been affected by the ripples of our Irian Jayan detour. They all talked of the pilot's stress, at least until there was word that we were being well-treated.

On his first return, he had left the Papua New Guineans at Kambi, but had been stopped from turning round immediately. He needed clearance from Jakarta and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moresby. The clearance did come, but it was quickly followed by a report from the pilot of the plane that had brought the priest to Ubrub. This said that we were being detained in custody and led Foreign Affairs to withdraw the pilot's authorisation to make the return trip. The next day our pilot stayed near the border until a solution was found. He took off within minutes of the second approval being confirmed, this time for the unscheduled flight, and landed before the Indonesians in Ubrub had received information about it. If this had not come through, if they'd arrested him for landing and taking off without permission, the problems could have been endless and much less comfortable.

All the worry and fear of the people working to get us out from this side were heightened by their knowledge that Ubrub is in the centre of the border military operations zone in which there are serious confrontations with OPM (Free Papua Movement). Not long ago, when the station was held by the OPM, a Swiss doctor and two Indonesian timber merchants had been killed after another unintentional landing.

Now, the immediate tension has worn off, but I still feel that I have a long way to unwind. I hope they send us prints of the film and that David gets the letter I sent with the police chief to Yogyakarta.

*Tuesday 14th October*

The story is still not done. Returning to Vanimo the mission people, who owned the plane, and the PNG border officer were distressed by a *Post Courier* article. It reported that we were being held in custody, that my films had been destroyed and that the plane had been prohibited from returning. Its tone was critical and accusatory, although I did smile at the banner headline 'University Professor kidnapped by Indos'. Since being back in Moresby, I have written to the *Post Courier* and been to see the Editor. I have also written to the Ambassador and this afternoon spent an hour with him. I asked if they could enquire about getting the film back.

*Postscript:* A month later, spending Christmas in England, I received four of my photographs from Jayapura. A few months later, I began research into social welfare of West Papuans in all the West Sepik and Fly River border camps. In time, this took me to camps in Southeast Asia and, over several years, to significant studies of conflict and integration in other parts of the world.



... and then the engines stopped

## A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Ross Garnaut

New Guinea south of the great mountains was on fire. For week after week huge billows of smoke had risen out of the Asmat swamps, mingled with the smoke of the fires in Kalimantan and drifted whither the wind would blow.

The normal dry as the Capricorn solstice approached had been extended beyond the normal experience by the most severe El Niño episode in living memory.

I had been in Merauke, gathering material for what was to become Chris Manning's and my book (the first, and still the only, on the Irian Jaya economy since the United Nations had sanctioned Indonesian rule).<sup>1</sup> Next stop was Jayapura, and I was allocated seat 1B on the Merpati Nusantara Twin Otter. There was no door separating the pilots' cabin from the passengers and if I had leant forward, I could have touched both pilots without loosening my seatbelt.

The Twin Otter took off to the north. The ground disappeared in the smoke haze when we were still rising steeply. Somewhere ahead were the Jayawijayas and the highest peaks in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. It was not a comfort when rising tension in the voices of the pilots was joined by a shift from Bahasa Indonesia to Javanese, making every word unintelligible.

We were still on steep ascent when the haze was devoured by another natural monster. Sheets of water rushed across the windows, front and

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<sup>1</sup> Ross Garnaut and Chris Manning, *Irian Jaya: The Transformation of a Melanesian Economy*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974.

sides, with a noise that drowned the engines' screams. Our sheet-metal-and-glass protector moved forward in awkward steps: up, down, left and right, separating the stomach from the pelvis and the spine at every lurch.

But these discomforts of the torso lost the contest for the attention of the mind. More compelling was the sight of two Indonesian faces a metre away from mine. Now silent. Lines of stress above the eyes. Drops of sweat running down the neck and soon soaking the collars of cotton shirts, in the cool above (I presumed) the high mountains. Movements now staccato and few.

I recall the thought that the only comfort was the absence of the white nun's serenity of the month before. She had made the sign of the cross with one hand and pointed out new mountain wonders with the other, while accelerating her Land Cruiser around every hairpin bend on the road that connects Kundiawa with the district of Gumine.

Tension cannot rise without limit. For three minutes or twenty the dozen occupants of Merpati's craft lived on a silent high plateau, bracing themselves against every new lurch, as we moved at the whim of the gales.

And then the rain stopped and we emerged from cloud into clear blue sky. The engine whine resumed. The pilot in the left seat reached for a sheet map a metre square. He placed it between himself and his colleague. Both glanced at it and then peered over the side of the plane to the green below. The first map was cast aside and a second set against the instrument panel. Again the peering over the side, and a reaching for a third map. Then a fourth.

The fourth was worth a closer look, followed by two and then three turning of the heads down to the jungles. I released the seatbelt and stood up to share the vision. I could see on the map the wriggles of the Mamberamo River joining the central mountains of Irian Jaya to the New Guinea north coast. I turned my own eyes to the view beneath the cockpit — the slow turns of a great river snaking its way through the jungle to the Bismarck Sea.

The two faces in front looked to each other and smiled. A few words from each, quick work on the controls, and the Twin Otter turned 100 degrees

to the right. The new course was parallel to the coast, halfway to the horizon on the left we were heading for Jayapura. Voices could again be heard, as conversations resumed from where they had been placed on hold perhaps half an hour before.

The new peace continued for only a few minutes. The right-hand pilot pointed ahead, and the left-hand rose to get a better look. Tin roofs of a substantial town were coming into view on the left. But a substantial town, without the towering hills above the harbour that herald the approach of Jayapura. Another silence. Less tense but still anxious glances between the pilots. A few words of Bahasa, more work on the controls. The plane banked and banked. By the time its trajectory had flattened out, it was again parallel with the coast, but now the sea was on the right.

It was not long before the unmistakable lines of Irian Jaya's Lake Sentani came into view, and then the airstrip nearby. Better than following the Sepik to an unexpected arrival at Wewak. A nice enough town, but it would have been a hassle going back to Brigadier General Jusuf Singedekane in the Special Office for Irian Jaya in Jakarta, to reinstate my appointment with the Bupati in the Indonesian Provincial Capital of Jayapura.



*... and then the engines stopped*

## COMMAND PERFORMANCE

Bryant Allen

Few of us can say that they are the only person in the world to have done a particular thing. There are just too many of us to be certain that someone, some time, somewhere, has not also done what we are claiming to have done. You even have to queue up to reach the top of Mount Everest these days. But I think I can safely say that I am one of only four people ever to have parachuted onto the rugby field at Kundiawa in the central highlands of Papua New Guinea. And I was ordered to do it by a Deputy Prime Minister.

I received a phone call to my desk in a government office in Port Moresby in September 1981. I was then the secretary of the Port Moresby Skydivers Club. A husky voice on the other end of the phone line informed me that it belonged to Sir Iambakey Okuk's personal assistant, and that Sir Iambakey wanted skydivers at the Kundiawa launch of his campaign for the upcoming national elections. The last thing I wanted to do was to get a largely expatriate sporting club identified with a Deputy Prime Minister's election campaign.

'It's not as easy as that,' I replied. 'We would have to get to Kundiawa, stay the night, have a suitable aircraft on standby and have all the clearances from Civil Aviation. It would be very expensive.'

The husky voice responded, 'The costs are not a problem. You will take a chartered aircraft direct to Kundiawa. We will pay for your accommodation there. You will use a Hughes 500 helicopter belonging to Pacific Helicopters, Mr Okuk's company. Mr Okuk has already cleared the jump



with Civil Aviation. He *is* the Minister for Transport. He wants four jumpers, and you will use that smoke stuff. You know what I mean?’

‘What? Oh the smoke? Yes, yes, I know. But I’m still not sure about this. The Club doesn’t usually get involved in politics. We just do charity things, school fetes and stuff like that.’ I blathered on.

The caller ignored me. ‘I’ll call you back tomorrow with the details of the charter. Goodbye.’

So, some days later I found myself sitting in a helicopter, in an unusually cloudless sky, high over the Wahgi River, watching the sunlight and shadows move slowly around the cabin and some of the most spectacular scenery in the world go past the open doors. Phil is sitting up front with the pilot while Ed, Marg and I are on the bench seat across the back, with both back doors removed.

As we climb through 12,000 feet, I have time to think of the strange collection of characters who had occupied the chartered Banderantie with us yesterday. Iambakey Okuk’s white advisers, seemingly all graduates of Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s Kingaroy School of Political Graft and Spin. At least two were in white suits with white shoes and very dark glasses and another was wearing a cowboy suit, with large hat and beautiful high-heeled boots to match. The husky voice was explained by a tracheotomy. I could not get Dr Stangelove out of my mind. I wanted to keep a nice academic arm’s length from the political games they were about to start playing. I didn’t want to be associated with these people.

We spent the morning repacking on the hotel lawn, watched by skeptical hotel staff, who thought they were having their legs pulled when we told them we were going to jump off a helicopter and fly back to earth unscathed. We then waited several hours while hundreds of people streamed down every road into Kundiawa and into the rugby ground. Iambakey Okuk twice visited the airfield, adjacent to the rugby ground, to remind an impatient pilot that he owned the helicopter and that it was not to take off until he ordered it to. On his third visit to give the order to take off, he brushed aside our concerns that the ground was completely packed with people, many of them carrying long spears.

He would order them to make a space, he said. We quietly decided to land on the airfield beyond the ground if the promised space did not appear.

Stepping off the skids of a slow-moving helicopter is much more cold-blooded than leaving a fast-flying plane. There is no slipstream and you can see the earth beneath your feet, thousands of feet below. We lit our smoke flares and stepped off together, two from each side. We waited until there was enough air to work with and quickly formed a square, then a line. Higher than normal, to give ourselves plenty of time to find an alternative landing place, we tracked away and opened. I was about 3,500 feet up when I stopped falling. After the roar of the helicopter and the rush of air in the fall, the silence was palpable. The air was soft and cool. I could hear a high-pitched shrieking. I turned to the south to look out over the Wahgi Gorge. An eagle was going past in the other direction about 500 metres away.

I located the airstrip and, using the smoke drifting from fires in gardens on the ground, manoeuvred to be upwind of the rugby ground. The rugby ground itself looked like an ants' nest on a hot day. It was swarming with little black dots. There was no green showing at all. The airport was downwind of the rugby ground. We were going to have to make a decision while still quite high, if we were to over-fly the ground and reach the airfield. But Kundiawa is on a spur sticking out over a deep gorge, with the ground falling away hundreds of feet on three sides. There is a large margin of error for a parachutist, provided you don't mind ending up in a sweet potato garden and making a long up-hill walk back. If the worst came to the worst, it would be possible to turn away from the power lines, fences and tall trees around the rugby ground and run down the hill. The only real danger facing us if we failed to land in the rugby ground was Iambakey's wrath.

Marg opened lower than the rest of us. As I zigzagged to hold a position upwind of the ground, I watched her turn onto a final approach. But the ground was still completely packed with people. The spears were now clearly visible — all pointing up! Marg decided to call their bluff. As she passed over the outer fence, a noise began that was at first difficult to identify from 500 feet up. It started as an all-pervasive hum, quickly

turned into a roar and then into a full-throated scream. The thousands of people on the ground had finally comprehended firstly, that we were humans and, secondly, that we were intending to land on the ground they were occupying. Like the Red Sea in Cecil B. de Mille's *Moses*, the crowd parted in front of Marg, to reveal a long narrow strip of green, running across the field, around about the halfway line.

As Marg flew down this corridor of screaming people, a little old lady, *bilum* flying from her head, digging stick in her hand, tried to run across the gap. Marg careered into the little old lady, bowling her off her feet and they both ended up rolling along the grass, jump suit, canopy and skinny arms, legs, *laplap* and *bilum* all mixed up together.

Marg had once canoed down the Sepik River on her own, but she had never spent much time in the Highlands and as she tried to disentangle herself from the little old lady, the word 'payback' jumped into her mind. Perhaps the little old lady's relatives would attack her for knocking the old dear flat.

Once I had seen the crowd part, I had followed Marg down and was only a few metres behind her when she and the little old lady stopped rolling. I landed on my feet and kept running. Already arms were reaching into the tangle. The little old lady was dragged out of the mess and, despite voluble protests and shrieks of pain, was being slapped around the head and shoulders by the mob. I stepped between her and her assailants and shouted, 'Longlong lapun meri, larim em!' (Crazy old lady. Leave her alone.) The mob burst into laughter, and released the old girl. Her quick glance at me, helmeted and goggled, showed something between pure terror and heartfelt gratitude. She ducked away into the crowd and disappeared.

Marg and I turned to rescue our canopies before the crowd trod them into the mud and to watch Ed and Phil landing behind us. Above the noise of the crowd, Iambakey could be heard on loudspeakers, like a circus ringmaster, in a staccato mixture of Pidgin and English, explaining how he alone, for the first time ever, had brought parachuting to Kundiawa, something previously seen only in Port Moresby and Mount Hagen.

## COMMAND PERFORMANCE

We were ushered through the crowd towards the grandstand. The grandstand at Kundiawa is a miniature version of grandstands that were built at rugby grounds all over Australia and New Zealand during the 1930s. A box contains a flight of wooden seats that run back and upwards like large steps, from a verandah-like front, with a small set of stairs located centrally, leading from the ground to the first row of seats. A corrugated iron roof protects the occupants. As we walked along the front of the grandstand to receive Iambakey's blessings and to be given one of the hundreds of cartons of beer he was about to present to the crowd, I glanced up to see who had been given the places of honour. The relief I experienced was greater than anything I had felt when the crowd had parted to let Marg land.

Sitting somberly and clearly uncomfortably in the front row was the Australian High Commissioner. Next to him was the Ambassador of the United States of America, a few places to her left, the New Zealand High Commissioner and nearby the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China. They were surrounded by many other members of the Port Moresby Diplomatic Corps. We were not the only ones giving a command performance that afternoon.



*... and then the engines stopped*

## **OR, YOU COULD GO BY ROAD**

Margaret Chung

I had a ticket to fly to Tari, but I decided to go by PMV [Public Motor Vehicle]. In the two weeks I had been in Papua New Guinea I'd heard stories about flying and, as people knew my destination, about navigating the high pass into Tari — the Tari Gap. But, more than that, I'd had enough of being chaperoned about in a mostly white world, isolated by cautionary tales from this extraordinary country. Riding a bus is a sure way to meet local people and so in Mendi I boarded a 16-seater mini-bus for the ride to Tari.

I was one of the first on board. We waited a long time in the heat, looped through town, waited again at another spot. When the mini-bus was jammed full, when not another box or bag, let alone person, could fit aboard, we set off. We were soon driving through thick bush. The men in the front seats set about a loud chanting, very loud indeed inside a packed mini-bus. I had never heard the like. To my ears it was discordant, belligerent, truly wild. My fellow passengers were all Highland men, most returning home from working elsewhere. This I gathered from their many bags and cardboard boxes and from the money they must have spent on the extraordinary quantity of alcohol they had with them.

Bottles are tugged from bags, passed around, downed at a long gulp. The man in front of me drinks three half-pint bottles of whisky in the first half-hour. A man to his side pours beer into his mouth so fast it streamed past both of his ears. Then, out of the incomprehensible din, what I least want. A shout in English, drawing attention to me: 'Miss, you want a beer?'

A quiet 'No', and a shake of my head.

'Miss, Miss, you're okay, you'll be okay.'

A van-load of men's heads turn to stare at me curiously. I mumble my thanks and try to resume invisibility by gazing expressionlessly out my window. The carousing grows. I realise there are two separate groups of travellers, besides myself: the men in front who are led by a particularly boisterous fellow and his side-kick, the English speaker; and another group behind me. A rude sort of singing contest breaks out between the front and back passengers but it degenerates into shouts. Despite my best invisibility act, the English speaker spots me again:

'Miss, Miss, you're okay, we'll look after you.'

Thanks very much indeed.

The shouting contest grows, subsides, picks up again. I have no idea why. Then, for a terrifyingly endless time, perhaps all of 10 minutes or so, the whole bus is engulfed in a deafening, screaming fight. The men in front have turned to face the passengers in the back, furious faces spitting violent words. I can't understand the words but they are only curiosities, for imprecations, profanities and curses belong to an international language: there are only so many ways to fornicate, or perform bodily functions that usually go unmentioned, or other ways to severely insult human dignity, and there are only so many credible ways to threaten revenge. The front ring leader tries to clamber to his feet as the mini-bus lurches around a corner but he falls across his neighbours and they push him back to his seat. Thank God, there really is no room to move. He is answered by incensed screams from behind me. I look at the driver's mirror. He is intently huddled over his wheel, driving as if his life depends on it. No doubt it does, I tell myself grimly, and so does mine. If this damned bus stops, I certainly will not go unnoticed and the kind of looking after I might expect from 20 or so angry and very drunk men will surely be rough. Outside the window is only bush, a winding gravel road, occasionally a rocky stream. No houses, no settlements, no place to get out and admit I'd made a mistake; I wished I had flown; that I wanted asylum from my unendurable fellow travellers.

It's a five-hour trip. I play stoical little games with my watch, silly things that have seen me pass unpleasant times before: it's now 1.30, if we make it to 2 o'clock without disaster, then the trip will be three-fifths over; every three minutes on my watch represents 1 per cent of this ghastly trip and so I shall just count very slowly to 100, and so on. The screaming match has stopped but the shouting, ragged singing and drinking continue. Whenever I try to relax the English-speaker seems to notice: 'Miss! Miss! ...'

Occasionally the mini-bus stops to let off a passenger. As the crush subsides it picks up others. We seem to be stopping in the middle of nowhere. People disappear into or emerge through the thick wall of jungle. A schoolboy comes aboard and takes the seat which is now vacant beside me. He realises at once what he is amongst and talks to me quietly in English: 'Don't be frightened, maybe they'll get off soon.'

'Don't worry, Tari is not far away.'

His words are reassuring but he is pretty tense himself.

Gradually the original passengers disembark. Finally, about half an hour before Tari, what I have been wishing for hours comes to pass: the ringleader of the front rowdies, one of the few who has not succumbed to the alcohol but shouted, sung and guzzled booze unrelentingly, disembarks. The schoolboy and I smile at each other. The rowdy is standing in the road by the driver's window calling for his luggage. It is offloaded. The rowdy raves on. Someone calls quietly to the driver, 'Go, go'. The driver inches forward, but the rowdy hurls his arm through the side window with a shriek and grabs the driver by the neck. I have the dubious benefit of the schoolboy's translation.

'He is saying the driver will die.'

'Now he is shouting for his people who live behind those trees to come and kill the driver.'

The driver seems to be apologising, quietly but passionately. The rowdy withdraws his arm and consults his relatives who are now on the road. The schoolboy reports: 'We can go but the driver has to fly out from Tari or they will kill him on his way back.'

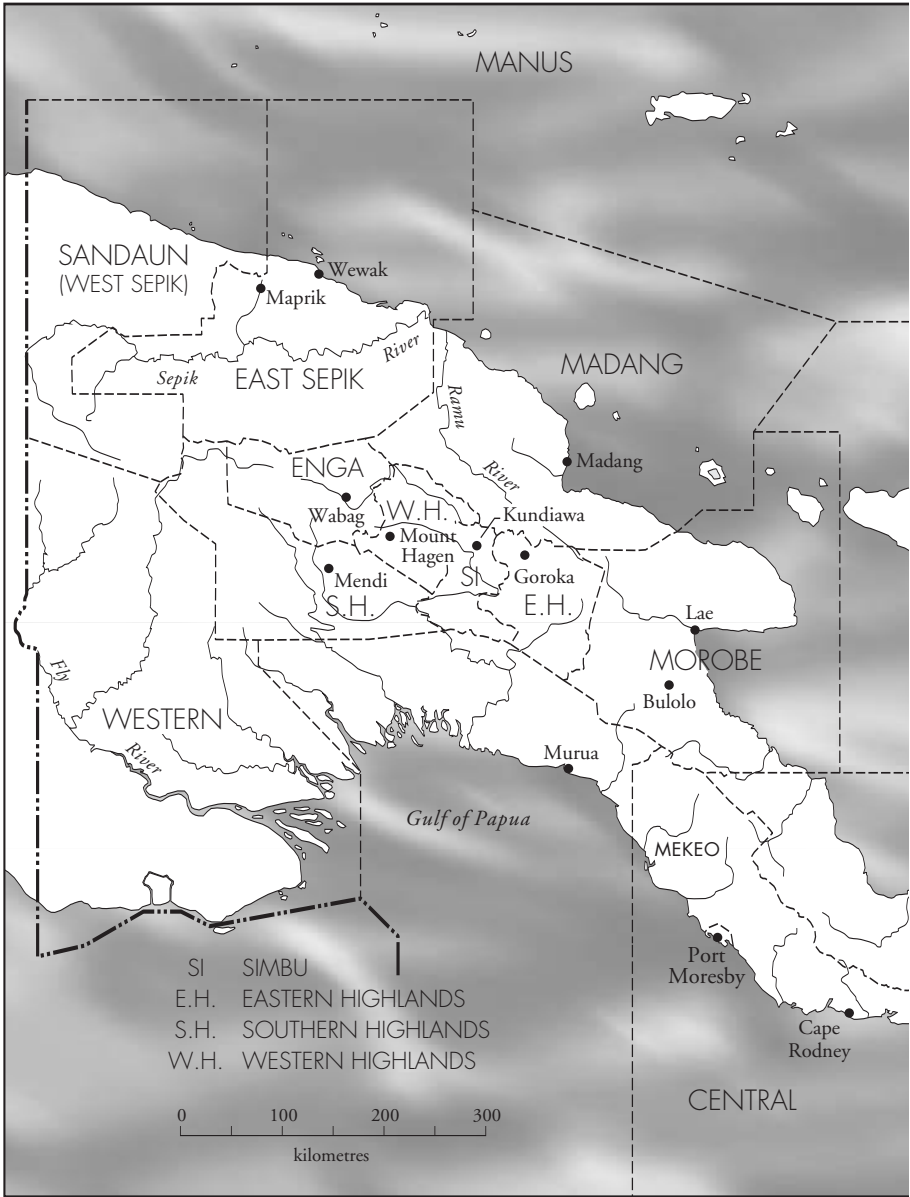


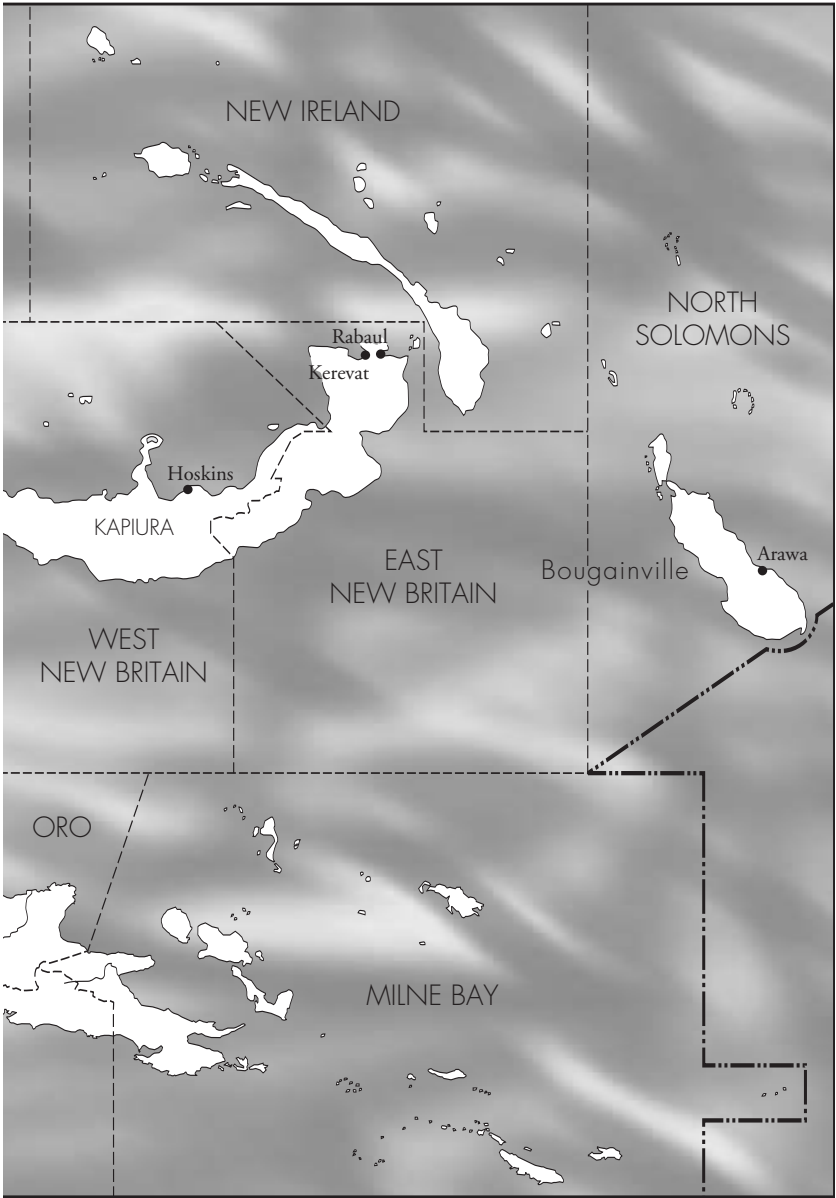
... AND THEN THE ENGINES STOPPED

The final drive into Tari is quiet. We round a sharp corner onto a bridge. Last week a PMV fell down there and some people died, the schoolboy tells me to make friendly conversation. We pull up at the edge of the Tari airstrip. I stand and look around. Very few of the passengers have endured the entire trip from Mendi but everyone is relieved to have arrived. In the common language of the recently terrified, we giggle at one another and warmly shake hands.

Perhaps I will fly next time.

# **MAP OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA**





## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Bryant Allen** is a geographer who has lived and worked in Papua New Guinea since 1971. He turned down the offer of pilot training at age 17 in order to play rugby and has regretted it ever since. He continues to enjoy light aircraft flying as a passenger in Papua New Guinea. In Canberra he flies as a pilot in Microsoft's Flight Simulator Cessna.

**R. Michael Bourke** has worked as an agronomist and geographer in Papua New Guinea for over 30 years. This work, together with cave exploration and bushwalking, has taken him all over PNG, often in light aircraft. He is based at The Australian National University in Canberra, from where he makes periodic forays into the PNG bush.

**Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza** was born in Genoa, Italy, and throughout his career specialised in the study of the genetics of human populations. He was Professor of Genetics at Stanford University, California, from 1970 to 1992.

**Margaret Chung** lives in Fiji and works as a development consultant, mostly in the Pacific Islands region. She still regularly travels by bus, carrier and other sometimes uncertain forms of transport but has learned to relax.

**William C. Clarke** crossed the Pacific from the USA in 1964 to spend a year in the Simbai Valley in Papua New Guinea pestering the local people with questions about how they gardened and managed their forests. Later, in the 1970s, the proud possessor of a PhD in Geography, he returned to continue questioning patient Papua New Guineans about gardens and trees in widely scattered parts of the country. He also taught for several years at University of Papua New Guinea and is currently at The Australian National University writing an eccentric ethnography of the people in the Simbai Valley.

**Ross Fardon** descends from North Queensland prospectors, and has spent his career in mineral exploration in about 14 countries, with a slight sidestep to run the Department of Mines and Energy in South Australia. You cannot love mineral exploration without a love of lands

and peoples. He nowadays consults in management, minerals and government departments, and yearns for the times in the Papua New Guinea Highlands.

**Colin Filer** is Convenor of the Resource Management in Asia–Pacific Program at The Australian National University. He has conducted research in PNG since 1972, taught at the University of Papua New Guinea from 1982 to 1994, and was Head of the Social and Environmental Studies Division of the National Research Institute from 1995 to 2000.

**Ross Garnaut** is Professor of Economics in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University. At the time of the story he was a Research Fellow with the ANU's New Guinea Research Unit in Port Moresby.

**Peter J. Grimshaw** was raised in Papua New Guinea and worked with the Commonwealth Department of Civil Aviation in PNG. His interest in flying was encouraged by notable PNG pilots, including Bobby Gibbes and Frank Goossens. He was Foundation Secretary of the Aero Club of Papua but later opted for a more mundane life in Australia. He was Business Manager of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, from 1964 to 1997.

**Ian Hughes'** small adventure in 1966 was the start of his Sydney University honours year, and he returned to Papua New Guinea from The Australian National University for extended adventures on foot, resulting in *New Guinea Stone Age Trade*. Since then he has been mostly teaching. Like so many others, the country got into his blood (not only in the form of malaria) and his most recent visit was in 2001.

**Amirah and Ken Inglis** lived in Papua New Guinea from 1967 to 1975 at the University of Papua New Guinea where Ken was Professor of History and later Vice-Chancellor. They now live in Canberra. Amirah's books include *Not a White Woman Safe* and *Karo*.

**Gavan McDonell** went to Papua New Guinea in 1966 as Coordinator of Transport and was founding Director of the Department of Transport and Civil Aviation. He spent quite a bit of the next several

decades in various other countries of the Third World and, in the 1990s, of the Second World — the Caucasian and Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union. He lives in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales.

**Rosemary Preston** is Director of the International Centre for Education in Development, University of Warwick. In the mid-1980s she worked in the Educational Research Unit, University of Papua New Guinea.

**Malcolm Ross** migrated with his family from England to Australia in 1973, spending three hours at Mascot Airport, Sydney, followed by ten years in Papua New Guinea. He was a school teacher, Lecturer at Goroka Teachers College, and then Principal of GTC from 1980 to 1983. During his ten years in New Guinea he spent many enjoyable hours as a passenger in aircraft ranging from Cessnas to Fokker Fellowships. Since 1983 he has been in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, where he is now Director of the Centre for Research on Language Change.

**Susan W. Serjeantson** always fancied herself as a writer, but fortunately for her future career, she chose science instead. Her early work in medical research was based at the University of Hawaii and at the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research. After joining the John Curtin School of Medical Research, The Australian National University, in 1976, she continued to do medical research in the Western Pacific, mainly during Canberra winters. She is now Executive Secretary of the Australian Academy of Science.

**David Solomon** is contributing editor of *The Courier-Mail*, Brisbane. For many years he has flown between Brisbane and Canberra for meetings of the Council of The Australian National University, but normally in larger and more sedate planes than those in which he flew in Papua New Guinea.

**Marjorie Sullivan** went to Papua New Guinea in 1970 (DC3s, and push-me-pull-you Cessnas); returned to work on an archaeological project in the Western Highlands between 1974 and 1977; and then taught physical geography at the University of Papua New Guinea in

1977 and 1984–1991. In that time, and since, she has undertaken many environmental assessment studies that involved many small aircraft. She loves helicopters, has had some dubious experiences with small planes, and understands the real reason why the Pope kisses the ground whenever he steps off his aircraft.

**R. Gerard Ward** migrated from New Zealand to London and then to Papua New Guinea where he was Professor of Geography at the University of Papua New Guinea. This role allowed him to see a lot of the country from the air and the ground. He now lives in Canberra, having moved there in 1971 as Professor of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University. He was Director of the School for some years. Even in retirement he still enjoys the views of Earth from the air, in large or small planes.

**Marion Ward** lived in Papua New Guinea from 1967 to 1972 and experienced the delights and occasional terrors of flying in small and large aircraft and helicopters above many parts of that ‘land of the Unexpected’. She carried out research on transport in Papua New Guinea at The Australian National University’s New Guinea Research Unit of which she was the Field Director. Since then she has worked as a consultant with Gavan McDonnell and independently, in Asia and the Pacific.

**Elsbeth Young** left her native Scotland in 1971 and has subsequently spent the second half of her life as an academic geographer teaching and conducting research largely in Papua New Guinea and Australia. While travelling for her fieldwork-based research into the many elements affecting contemporary development in this region, she has had many close shaves, not only while airborne but often while struggling to control 4WD vehicles on tracks both greasy and flooded, or buried beneath bull-dust and sand. These experiences continue to convince her that ‘life is a lottery’, and every time she hears of yet another serious prang she realises how lucky she has been.