

THE BOUGAINVILLE STORY

TALBOT LOVERING:

On 11 September 1969, *The Times* of London asked the question, "What happened between 10 August and 11 September that turned a potential international incident into a remarkable settlement?"

The events in question took place in the South Pacific on Bougainville, a cigar-shaped island some 130 miles long and 30 miles wide, about 500 miles east of mainland New Guinea. If you were to fly to the island's main town of Kieta, you would pass over a central range of mountains, some 8000 feet high, and perhaps a kindly pilot would tip the plane's wings to look down into a smoking volcano, whilst below you would see dense and lush vegetation on fertile volcanic soil.

It was from this angle that a geologist noticed that the country had a certain geological likeness to land in the Philippines containing copper. He investigated further among the maps and Mines Dept. of Port Moresby, and was persuaded that a large copper ore body might be found in a mountain valley on Bougainville called Panguna.

In 1963 the multi-national mining giant, Conzinc Rio Tinto of Australia, (CRA), started detailed prospecting. A company's 300 ton ship sailed to Bougainville, equipped with helicopter, laboratory and modern survey equipment which had to be flown into the mountains. By 1964, the helicopters were beating in and out of the Panguna valley. Prospectors were diamond-drilling deep into the rocks. A primitive road had been cut from Kieta to take the giant trucks. From the neighbouring hills, the Nasioi people watched this activity and wondered what was happening to their ancestral land.

By March 1969, CRA had completed its arrangements and announced that it would open up a large open-cut copper mine, estimated to cost \$350m. It formally entered into an agreement with the Territory of Papua New Guinea's Administration, whereby the Administration would give CRA the

right to mine the copper, and the company would a royalty to the Administration on the value of the copper sold. The Administration further undertook to make land available, not only for a mine, but also for a company town, and for a port from which to export the copper.

Until this time there had been individual attacks by civilians on surveyors and geologists of the company, but now widespread opposition erupted. A month after the company announced its plans to go ahead with the copper development, 1200 people met in Kieta, and voted almost unanimously against the Administration's plans to acquire 1640 acres for the site of a new town for the company's employees. A week later, about 200 villagers stormed the company's camp in the Panguna area, and Paul Lapun, the Member of the House of Assembly for South Bougainville, was enlisted by the District Commissioner, ~~De~~ Ashton, to pacify the situation. Indeed, the Port Moresby daily, 'The South Pacific Post', said that "There we have almost 70,000 people, i.e. the entire population of the island, who are in the process of violently opposing the Administration's actions."

Now there exists ^{ed at this time} in Papua New Guinea the office of Public Solicitor. He and his staff of 14 lawyers provide legal assistance to impecunious Papua New Guineans, and supply the defence council in all criminal trials. In many ways, the Public Solicitor stood between the native villagers and the arbitrary exercise of power by the colonial-like Administration. At that time, the Public Solicitor, Mr Peter Lawler, was watching carefully the situation that ^{was} developing on Bougainville. I joined his office in December 1968, a few months before the violence started to break out in Bougainville. An eddy he had made a regular challenge to the right of the Administration to allow the company to mine the copper. A case had been stated to the High Court of Australia alleging that the minerals belonged to the land-owners. It had always been so, even before World War I, when Bougainville was a colony of Germany. The German had recognised its rights, and the Australian Administration, after it had taken over the mandate from the League of Nations, had not itself acquired the minerals. And since the Australian Constitution expressly provided 'There could be no acquisition of a person's property, except on the condition that just terms for compensation were payable.' And since no compensation for minerals had been paid, the copper in the ground at Panguna belonged to the owners of the land. And the Mining Ordinances of Papua New Guinea giving permission to the company to mine the copper were invalid.

The court decision in the Northern Territory of Australia in 1963, Keene and the Commonwealth, expressly recognised that the requirement of the just terms and rules in the Constitution applied to the Territories of Australia as well as for the States.

But when the case came up to the High Court, the High Court felt otherwise. It said that the position was that, under one section of the Constitution, the Constitution gave power to the Commonwealth to acquire land on just terms, whilst under another section, it gave the power to administer Territories, and that the Territories' power was quite self-contained, and the just terms provision which applied to the taking of land in the States did not have to be applied to the Territories. And so the Bougainvilleans in the Territory of Papua New Guinea lost out.

Now perhaps it is not without interest to see the picture in Australia at this time. There, the Aboriginal people were becoming aware of the value of minerals in their lands. This High Court decision neatly closed the door to them to make such an argument in their case. This case is mentioned to demonstrate what was the prevalent attitude at that time to minerals by Australian authorities.

A month or two before the incident at Rorovana occurred, an event was taking place on the other side of the island that was to affect subsequent events. Two full-time workers in Moral Re-Armament, Mr George Wood from Scotland and the younger, Mr Nigel Cooper from New Zealand, had gone to the village home of Paul Lapun with the object of showing him a film. Paul Lapun was at this time the MHA for South Bougainville. He was in his mid-fifties. He had entered a Catholic Seminary at the age of 21. This was later destroyed during the war, when he decided to take up teaching. He did so until 1961. Then, with the support of his bishop and in the association of the Administration, he helped to explain and organise the functions of local government and community cooperation to the people of Bougainville. He was married and had two sons and three daughters. He had been elected to the House of Assembly in Port Moresby in 1964.

The film that Messrs Wood and Cooper had travelled so many miles to show Lapun was called *'FREEDOM'*, a full-length feature film made in Africa, and based on a play written by Africans who saw that a people with division in a family, racial discrimination, and bitterness in industry, was

in danger of losing its freedom. Land dispute is a central feature of the film, which comes out with an answering idea to heal the division and cure the mistrust. The opening word of the film say, "Freedom is our struggle. Freedom is our story. We wrote it, because this is what the heart of Africa wants to say to the world."

Lapun was shown this film and together with Wood and Cooper showed it at various centres to the people in his area. At each showing he explained to the audiences the significance of the ideas portrayed in the film, of the significance of absolute moral standards, and the possibility of finding God's idea on intractable problems.

Meanwhile, by August, a stand-off position between the Australian Administration and the local people on the Kieta side of the island was beginning to harden. The mining company had a strict time-table of development. Some \$200m was being borrowed on which interest was payable. Contracts for the supply of copper had been signed with Japan and other countries, and had to be honoured. A mine had been opened up. The road to the mine had been constructed. And now the construction of a port for the ore-carrying ships was overdue. Extra land was needed in connection with this port development. This had to be taken from the villagers of Rorovana. But the Rorovana people had refused to part with any of their land. In their way of life they had no concept of selling land. It was owned communally by the people. Since land could not be sold, then neither could it be bought. So it was vital to retain such land as the people had. It was their means of survival. So the Administration gave the villagers an ultimatum: Agree to sell the land at the Administration's value of \$105 an acre, or the land would be taken compulsorily.

Anticipating a refusal, the Administration prepared for a show of force. A contingent of specially trained and equipped riot police was flown to the island and camped near the land in dispute. The villagers still refused to part with their land.

On Tuesday 5 August 1969, a confrontation took place. On the one side were the builders lined up to sneak onto the land and to clear the coconut palms from the 175 acres required. Alongside of them stood lines of riot police with batons, shields, rifles and respirators. Facing them were a motley crowd of some 65 villagers, men and women and some children,

Louering ④

unarmed and quite defenceless. They were told to move out of the way, which they ignored. They refused an attempt to shepherd them out of the way. Then a barrage of some 150 tear-gas shells were fired at them. They stood firm. Then the riot police charged with their batons. The villagers gave way and retreated to the Rorovana village - overwhelmed, defeated, and apparently alone. But the media carried this news to the world.

The BBC, over its World Service, told of armed police using tear gas to try to force native land-owners to yield their land to the copper-development project. Australia reacted. On Sydney newspaper carried the headline, **Bloody Thugs**. The Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia threatened to declare 'black' all cargo bound for the copper development. Even the *'Australian Financial Review'*, while supporting the copper project, commented that "Some aspects of Australia's Administration in the Territory were less than impressive", and that "Some District Commissioners, with their doubt, their arrogance and their remoteness, seemed to be throw-backs to the British Raj rather than Australian civil servants."

Immediately, on the day following the tear-gas incident on Bougainville, the Public Solicitor in Port Moresby told the Administrator in writing that there were no legal grounds upon which the action could be justified. And there was a strong probability that all those taking part in the incident and those who directed the action had brought themselves within the ambit of the criminal law. The Administrator replied the following day giving his assurances that "Administration and police officers would act strictly in accordance with the law and within the ambit of their legal powers."

The Crown Solicitor himself went across to Bougainville. The riot police were withdrawn and sent to their camp. The company held its hand. I flew across to Bougainville and at the airstrip at Kieta, waiting to board the plane to Port Moresby, I saw Mr Paul Lapun. I greeted him and enquired where he was going. He replied, "To Australia." I asked, "Why?" He replied, "To get a court injunction to stop the copper mine development." After the plane took off, I called at the post office in Kieta and sent a telegram to a friend in Australia, Mr James Coulter. He had been giving his time to the work of Moral Re-Armament since serving as a pilot of World War II. James Coulter will now take up the story.

Louvering (5)