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A MICROADVENTURE, A WAIT, A JOURNEY

BY ROAD TO HAGEN

Mountains, valleys, cans, coffee and raskols — a development worker's journey into PNG's Western Highlands Province

A story by **RUSS GRAYSON**

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Russ Grayson is an online and photojournalist with a background in the adventure equipment industry, print/photo/online journalism, permaculture education and media and international development.

At the time this story takes place he was working with APACE (Appropriate Technology for Community and Environment), a Sydney-based international development agency operating in the south-west Pacific, mainly in the Solomon Islands and to a lesser extent in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The agency was engaged in technology transfer for village electrification through the installation of micro-hydroelectric systems and training of local people to maintain the systems and assess sites.

Micro-hydro electrification brought opportunities to villagers. Children could study in the evening, increasing literacy, home life was easier with better illumination than that provided by kerosene lamp, and villagers could improve their economic situation with refrigeration to store fish for market and other benefits brought by machinery.

In the years before this story takes place, APACE had installed a micro-hydroelectric turbine at Aguan in eastern PNG.

Russ was program manager and development education coordinator APACE.

With Solomon Islands-based farming systems project manager, Tony Jansen, Russ later set up TerraCircle Inc, a small, cooperative social enterprise working in the Solomon Islands and Australia.

DAY 1: The long flight to Lae

IT STARTED with a phone call one sultry day in Honiara. On the other end of the line was the programme director in far-away Sydney.

“We have finally made contact with Tom Jumeraii”, she said. “So you can go on over as we discussed in Sydney”. So now I am off to Papua New Guinea (PNG) and not to Australia as expected.

There is no escaping the sticky humidity where the three of us wait inside the big shed that is the international terminal at Honiara airport. Most of the ceiling fans are going but their effect is minimal. Tony, the program’s in-country manager and Fiona, a member of the NGOs (non-government organisation) executive committee, wait for the early afternoon flight to Brisbane. Soon, they will exchange Honiara’s heat and humidity for Brisbane’s milder version of the same.

These past few weeks we have been doing field work in the villages in which the Kastom Gaden Program (KGP) operates on Malaita, the long continental island that lies on the Pacific, the eastern, side of Guadalcanal, just across Indispensable Strait. That has been mainly educational work with village farmers and the program’s training staff. It also included informal evaluation so that topics and teaching methods can be improved. Fiona is good at asking the strategic questions that yield useful information and at teaching program workers various skills.

Tony, waiting here with us in the still, sticky air of the terminal building, started the Kastom Garden Program (KGP) in 1995. I came on board later as Australia-based program manager). Local organic farmer, Joini Tatu, once education minister in the Solomon Island government, gave Tony use of part of his urban farm for a small training farm. Tony had a sago palm ‘grass’ house, as they are locally known, built to accommodate the KGP office and provide living space.

The AusAID funded program (AusAID is Australia’s international development agency) focuses on improving the food security of participating Solomon Island villages by combining traditional farming systems with modern scientific knowledge. That would be called ‘organic farming’ in Australia. It is Low external Input Sustainable Agriculture in international development jargon — LEISA.

KGP is a program of Australian NGO, APACE (Appropriate Technology for Community and Environment). The agency was inspired by ideas around intermediate technology (also known as ‘appropriate technology’), itself the idea of British economist, EF Schumacher in the 1960s and since taken up worldwide as an affordable hybrid of traditional and modern technology. APACE was established as a technical assistance program around village electrification in the Solomon Island and, to a lesser extent, PNG. It installed microhydroelectric turbines where there was sufficient flow of water and trained local technicians to maintain them. Those who have lived without electric light and power, who, like so many rural Solomon Islanders rely on imported kerosene as an energy source, will appreciate the benefits electricity brings.

My flight leaves a half hour before Tony and Fiona are to fly out to Brisbane. I board the Air New Guinea aircraft. The engines start and we taxi out and speed down the airstrip. We make a sharp turn and the aircraft climbs out west, across the jungle clad mountainous spine of Guadalcanal. Soon we are cruising over the Solomon Sea, PNG-bound.

Flying... it's something like three hours to Port Moresby, the capital of PNG. We pass over ocean then over a chain of islands dotting a turquoise sea, then more ocean before crossing the PNG coast.

Descending... Port Moresby sits on the coastal plain fronting Torres Strait, the body of water that separates PNG from Australia's northern tip. It's a hazy, brown-coloured landscape down there but there are high, grey-green mountains off to the north. I realise those are the Owen Stanley Range and recall that it was here that Australian troops stopped the Japanese advance in 1942. I recall, too, that it was in those ranges that my father fought in those desperate days. I remember him telling me how respected the Japanese soldiers and praised the PNG highlanders for the help they gave to Australian forces.

Waiting in Moresby

Port Moresby airport terminal is a big shed, just like Honiara's terminal only much larger. It also has ceiling fans rather than air conditioning and I assume, like those in Honiara, they sometimes work.

It is hot and dark in here. Most of the fluorescent lights have failed, casting the crowded interior into a humid gloom. When they come on again in the late afternoon the event is greeted with cheers from waiting passengers.

Who are these people waiting for their flights, I wonder? The majority are PNG nationals. There's a few Asians and fewer Europeans. I assume they await flights to regional centres and to the islands scattered off PNG's north coast.

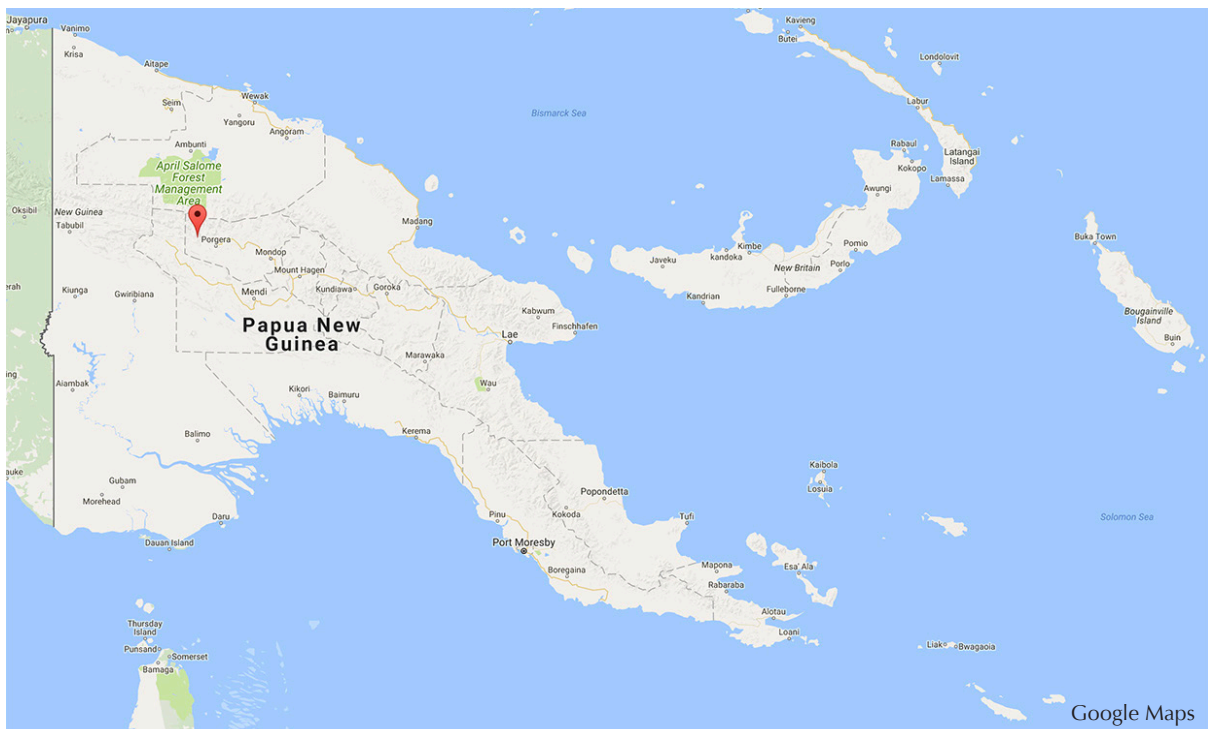
I learn that the flight to Lae, PNG's second largest city over the ranges on the north-east coast, is running late. Six hours later it is still running late. The man sitting next to me is waiting for a flight to Mt Hagen and it, too, is late. He tells me to insist that the airline pays for overnight accommodation if the flight does not eventuate. Another man I speak to, a man of Asian origin who lives in Lae, is also awaiting the flight but he is taking the delay philosophically as if he is used to such things.

Over the ranges

It is late afternoon as we climb out of Moresby and make a long, curving turn to the north. I watch as the coastal plain below folds into a corrugated landscape... a jumble of ridges deeply-incised with valleys cut by fast-flowing streams. There is plenty of forest down there but no sign of the many villages that dot this fantastic landscape. The deep valleys are already cast in the gloom of approaching evening.

The sun sits just above the ridges and I wonder if Tom is still waiting at Lae airport. If he is he has been there for hours and is a very patient man.

I look down onto a scene of grey mountainscape and fading light. The sun radiates a menacing orange colour through scattered cloud. Just after sunset the engines change pitch. We have started the descent into Lae.



DAY 2 to 4: Raskols

OVER THE MONTHS leading to my unexpected journey to Lae we became increasingly concerned about the project and about Tom. It was months since we had heard from him. Phone calls and faxes had gone unanswered.

With nothing heard we started to worry about the future of the project. Had something happened? Had Tom abandoned the project? We were reassured to find that no project funds were missing. In fact, Tom had not requested the transfer of funds for some time. Just what was the matter? Finding out was one of my reasons for travelling to PNG.

AusAID, the project's donor, was expecting a monitoring report. I explained our communication problem and, fortunately, they were easy-going about it. Less reassuring were people I knew in Sydney, people with experience of international development work in PNG. "Development is impossible in PNG", one woman told me, the sentiment being based on her own experience and reiterated by others.

Now, in Lae, I discovered what has befallen Tom, why he had been silent for months. And it was not nice.

Tom had run afoul of the violent and often-armed gangs of thugs known as 'raskols'. It is a mild term for gangs that are all too ready to resort to violent robbery.

Tom related how it happened. He was driving through the suburbs of Lae, along a road near the city tip where houses are few. The raskols stopped him, hauled him from the car, beat him with bottles and stole the car with its cargo of waste metal. The car was later found, burned. The reason we had been unable to contact Tom was because he was in hospital.

Raskols are a plague, Tom said in a sentiment echoed by others, both development workers and local people. They make life risky for both locals and visitors.

Tom told of how he talked his way out of an earlier encounter with raskols. Then, he was driving a load of waste metal back to the depot and had given a lift to an older woman. When the raskols stopped the car he asked them if they really would hurt the woman. She could just as well be their mother, he said. Maybe he touched a soft spot in their hearts. They told him to get going.

Many of the raskols are rural youth who drift into the cities but cannot find work. There, they make their own work of the illegal kind. A problem particularly in Port Moresby, Lae and along the Hilans Hiway, raskols are the reasons why offices in Lae are guarded by men carrying long sticks and why restaurants employ guards. They are a menace on the streets and the reason why later, in Port Moresby, we walked in a group when we went the short distance to a restaurant.

Someone complained to me that the PNG and sometimes the Australian press exaggerate stories about raskols. He said that the reporting was a bit over the top and that the reports merely sensationalised violence.

It was with difficulty that I tried to reconcile this with Tom's experiences.

DAY 2 to 4: Sojourn in Lae

YES, Tom is still waiting.

“What happened to you?” he asks as I take my pack from the baggage trolley and walk with him to his ute. “I have been waiting hours”.

Tom is of the short, stocky and strong build characteristic of PNG’s highland people. There is occasional enmity between highlanders and the coastal people who inhabit Lae, but like many highlanders Tom has made the city his home. He’s a ‘Mr Fixit’ type of character who has contacts and knows how to get things done. Educated at the Australian National University, Tom, it seems to me, is the type of character PNG needs to get things moving.

We drive to the University of Technology - Unitech, as it is known - and stop outside the one-storey accommodation building where I will spend the next three days. The manager insists on preparing me a full meal despite being well past meal time and despite my protestations about it being too much trouble. On the television in the sitting room I notice Channel Nine, beamed straight from Australia. It seems another world there.

Sprawling settlement by the sea

Lae is a sprawling settlement on PNG’s north coast. There’s the ubiquitous corrugated iron buildings found throughout the South Pacific, a modest business district and a ring of suburbs with both ‘permanent’ and traditional houses made of palm and other local materials. Unlike Port Moresby, which must be the only capital city in the world without road links to the country it administers, Lae has developed thanks to its road connections to the settlements along the PNG north coast and into the highlands, and its air and sea links with the many islands off the north coast.

Chinese restaurants are the places to eat and they seem to be frequented by the town’s business community. To get into one for lunch next day we pass through two doors and past a guard holding a big, solid stick. This, I learn, is as familiar as is the crime it is supposed to protect diners from.

Village supplies

Tom picks me up from Unitech in the morning and we drive through the suburbs and turn down a long street with bush along most of one side. The public bus we pass has steel mesh across the windows. This, I realise, says something about crime in the city.

‘Village supplies’. The sign on the front of the building announces its purpose. In the shopfront below women sort and sell the cast-offs of the region’s affluent society - second hand clothes from Australia.

It is the rear of the building I am interested in, the depot of the Can Care Lae Project. APACE, the NGO I work for, helped Tom set up the project after having obtained funds from AusAID.

When the small business/metals recycling project was approved by AusAID and APACE's management team I was assigned to it as project manager. My purpose in being here is to assess progress made by the project and produce a monitoring report. That report is important because until Donella Bryce, the APACE director in Sydney made contact while I was in the Solomons, we heard nothing of Tom or the project for months. AusAID, too, was becoming edgy.

I look around. That is the crusher-bailer machine, and there is the small furnace that Tom spent project funds on in Brisbane. Tom explains that the furnace is not operating at present because it is being converted to burn waste oil. A bit polluting, I think, but what happens to the oil otherwise? I see the large pile of beverage containers and other non-ferrous waste metals destined for either machine. The brass, Tom explains, is set aside until there is enough of it to process as a batch, as it requires higher temperatures to melt and cast into ingots.

The crusher-bailer is a hand-operated press that compresses cans into square cubes around 35cm a side. By the side of the building, ingots melted and cast from waste metals are being stacked until there is enough of them for shipment. With the crushed and bailed cans they will fill a shipping container destined for a buyer in Brisbane. The trade in waste metals is international and the price the project receives for their recycled metals is set a world away on the London Metals Exchange.

A man carrying a huge sack of cans that he has collected from the streets walks up to the building. A staff member weighs them, pays the man in Kina and enters the transaction in a ledger. Systematic record-keeping, I note, observing that the project, at least, puts a few Kina into the pockets of locals and keeps a few people employed turning waste into income.

I note too that the cans are emptied out of the sack they are delivered in before weighing. That, Tom tells me, is in case any crafty collectors have put rocks in the bottom of the sacks.

In the afternoon Tom drops me off at Unitech. I walk around to find the appropriate technology centre bookshop on campus. It takes a bit of finding and is a small office and bookshop selling booklets on DIY tech, such as cooking stoves that can be made by villagers. I meet some technicians in the nearby workshop. One of them lights a sawdust-burning stove to show me how it works. There is a packed-mud oven that I will in later years see in Australia as a 'cobb oven'.

The organisation published the 1986 title, *Lik Lik Book* (PNG Pijin for 'Little Book'). Although I have a copy back in Australia I buy a new one as mine is starting to become tatty. Cost, ten kina, about AU\$10 at the time. The book was produced to assist PNG villagers make appropriate technologies to improve living conditions, but it is about a great deal more, such as bush foods and house construction.

Tomorrow, we make the journey along the Hilans Hiway (Highlands Highway) to Mt Hagen. It's a grand name for a winding gravel road.

DAY 5: Hilans Hiway

TOM PICKED ME UP at Unitech about 9.30 so we could make an early start on the road to Mt Hagen. I thank the accommodation manager and toss my pack into the ute and climb in.

I'm travelling light, with just a spare pair of trousers and a couple spare shirts, couple spare pair of socks and undies, a long sleeve Tshirt in case it gets cool in the mountains, my nylon rain poncho that also serves as a groundsheet, small wash kit including a small microfibre towel (they dry faster, are more compact and lighter weight than cotton towels), my compact, silk sleeping bag liner sack in case of dubious bed linen in the guesthouses and in case the temperature falls, a small camera and notebook and pen. All of this I carry in what we in Australia call a day pack. It is actually Fiona's, an old front-opening model made by Kathmandu which she bought in Perth some years ago. Some of the stuff I had during our work in the Solomons went back to Australia with Fiona.

There are definite advantages to minimalist travel. Other than light weight and low bulk, the minimalist traveller is more mobile than someone weighed down with a bulky, heavy pack. It is not difficult to carry a small pack with just a minimum of stuff around all day if you have to.

We slow as we approached the police checkpoint near the airport. There is no one here so we drive through. Driving out of Lae I notice how the drought has damaged the coconut palms lining the road.

"Its effect has been patchy", says Tom. "In some places it is bad, in others it is not".

We will see more of this patchiness on our journey into the mountains. Some valleys remain verdant, others dry and scorched by fire. This is a serious drought.

Through the flat grasslands of the Markham Valley we go along this, the best maintained part of the Hilans Hiway. The Markham is a broad valley edged with low, forested ridges away in the distance. There is little traffic.

"There's an old airstrip from the war", Tom says as he points to our left.

I look and see nothing but long grass but, yes, there, a wide strip of concrete in the process of being overgrown. It's an old military airstrip. Artifacts from the Second World War are not uncommon, leftovers from that ferocious conflict that pitted a few poorly equipped Australians against Imperial Japan's military might.

"That wreckage", Tom says, pointing to debris beside a bridge we cross slowly, " ...was the bridge that was blown up by local landowners in a land dispute".

I have heard that highlanders are a wild bunch. Now I believe that they really do take matters into their own hands.

We drive on and the road swings left over a bridge spanning a wide river. The waters have incised deeply into the far bank. Now the road has started to climb gently and a little further and we stop at a village where there is a market.

“We’ll pick up some people I know here. They live in the highlands and they will be our security against raskols”, Tom explains. Soon the tray of the ute is filled with a half-dozen frizzy-haired highlanders. We set off again.

On the hiway

The Hilans Hiway is a roller-coaster strip of all-weather gravel that traverses the ridges and descends into the valleys of the PNG Central Highlands. Maybe Tom has made me a bit paranoid with his stories of the highland raskol danger, and how they once climbed aboard a moving truck and relieved it of its cargo, but soon the countryside takes my attention. The further we climb, the more rugged it becomes.

Goroko is a main settlements along the hiway, a large town. It is also a centre of the highlands coffee industry and today the villagers who grow the coffee have brought it to town. Here, they line the road to sell sackloads of beans to the processors who roast them.

Eventually, the coffee ends up on the overseas market. We see plantations near the villages we pass... coffee bushes growing below tall Casuarina trees that protect and provide them with nutrients. In Mt Hagen, we will visit a friend of Tom’s who owns a coffee processing plant.

The further along the Hiway we drive, gaining altitude, the closer to the ground the huts are built. In Lae, houses are usually raised in the style familiar from other Pacific Island coastal settlements. But up here they are built on the ground and, unlike the rectangular coastal houses, they are round. It is all about staying warm. The nights can be cold at these altitudes.

Checkpoint

A minibus is stopped by the side of the road and people stand around. Has it broken down, I wonder? Tom has already explained that you do not stop to help break-downs on the Hilans Hiway because they might be ambushes set by raskols.

We leave the bus in our dust plume as Tom speeds past but as we look back a figure wearing a blue uniform shirt and brandishing a military rifle steps out. He is waving at us. We reverse back and discover that the minibus has stopped because this is a police checkpoint. Twelve or so police are milling around, their dress a blend of military and police uniform, jeans and thongs, their weapons assault rifles and a couple pump action shotguns.

They look in the back of the ute to check that we are carrying no alcohol, firearms or drugs. I offer to open my pack for them but they decline. This is the second checkpoint we have encountered. Up here it is ‘dry’ country where alcohol is banned in an attempt to stem violence.

Into the Wahgi Valley

Over a rise and suddenly there's the splendid vista of the Wahgi Valley, a wide bowl of settlement and farm, tea plantation and vegetable garden surrounded by mountains now a deepish blue in the late afternoon light. Here, tea replaces coffee as the cash crop.

It is still 20 or so kilometres to Mt Hagen and we have just set out on the first asphalt since the Markham Valley when we make an unexpected stop.

"We've got a blowout", exclaims Tom.

We enter Mt Hagen as the light starts to fade.

DAY 6 to 9: Mt Hagen

IT IS 7.30pm. The manager closes the door, bolting it firmly. This is a daily ritual, sure as clockwork.

I am sitting in the common room, writing, when there is a loud knocking at the door. The manager looks out from the kitchen but does nothing.

The knocking comes again and the manager goes over to the door but does not release the latch. The voice outside says it wants accommodation. The manager explains that the door is shut promptly at 7.30pm and not opened until morning. He relents after further discussion. A man enters and the door is firmly latched again. In the opinion of the manager, guests are better inside and raskols outside after dark.

“I prefer to stay at the mission guest house”, says Tom as we drive into Mt Hagen. “They do not allow alcohol and it is quiet”.

He could have added that it is clean and there is hot water too. For 50 kina a day we get a plain but more than adequate dinner, a comfortable bed and a too-large breakfast of cereal, hard boiled egg, four slices of toast and all the coffee you want.

The place is managed by a dour American missionary couple with four young, blond children. The family seems quintessentially middle-America, small town variety. Perhaps it is their brand of Christianity that accounts for their being uncommunicative, unsmiling and disinterested in their guests. They seem to want to keep to themselves and rely on local staff to do the cleaning and cooking. It is like they have been in-country too long and are biding their time until they go home.

Tales of pigs and missionary adventure

“I met a highland man. His daughter died of starvation in the drought”, the missionary woman tells me. “But he still owned pigs that he could have eaten or sold to buy food. In some places, the priority for men is land and pigs... and only then women”.

She has blonde hair and is friendly though distant. I had spent last night talking with this missionary, whose husband runs the accommodation house, and a man from the Southern Highlands. The missionary’s story confirmed what I already knew about the value of pigs in PNG culture, that they are signifiers of wealth, are highly valued and bring status to their owners.

After finishing our meal we sat in the common room, a large, plain space equipped with armchairs and a modest library of mainly religious titles. Near the door was a radio where, each morning, one of the staff maintained a watch, tuning into the region’s HF radio network. Radio is the main means of communicating news and of keeping in touch with missionaries in outlying villages.

As often happens when strangers are forced together, our discussion moved to what we were doing in-country. The woman went on.

“Our mission is self-supporting. My husband works with a local construction company. My family spent the early 1980s and early 1990s in PNG. Now we are thinking that it might be time to go home”.

The Southern Highlands man spoke good English.

“I live in an isolated village. It is reachable only by MAF aircraft”, he tells us.

The Mission Air Fellowship (MAF) links isolated villages through its light aircraft service operating from Mt Hagen airport.

“I was educated at a bible college in Tasmania, Australia, where I spent two years”.

He had a keen sense of the importance of community development.

“Where I live I built a tourist lodge near a large waterfall. It attracts Europeans... the US ambassador stayed there... but few Australians come.

“I also helped build a school that educates from grade one to six. I found a couple volunteers to teach and eventually succeeded in getting the government to supply a teacher”, he said.

This energetic, middle aged man was also responsible for the construction of an airstrip. He told us that his village still uses kerosene as an energy source and he was interested in the micro-hydroelectric system I told him that I was here to discuss with the people from Wabag.

It was here I learned about the unofficial division of PNG between American and Australian missionaries, sort of a demarcation of territory which, I suppose, avoids territorial disputes between godly sects. The Highlands are noted for inter-tribal clashes, but inter-sect conflict between missionary clans offers little by way of advancement but more by way of entertainment.

Downtown

There are people everywhere. Walking around, standing on the footpath, talking. Women walk past, their colourful bilums, the traditional carry bag of highland PNG, supported on the forehead and draped down their back. Others wander into the few fast food shops selling greasy snacks, shops that would be more at home in a downmarket suburb in some Western city. There are lines five, six and more deep outside the post office where people wait their turn for the public phones. Who do they call, I wonder

Mt Hagen, a town of 28,000 or so, is the major settlement of PNG's Central Highlands. The place has a frontier feel, a feeling enhanced when Tom points out where the most recent bank robbery took place. That was only a few weeks before.

As I walk around I detect an edginess, a restlessness, a tension. Today is payday for those who work in town. It is also the day that people come in from the surrounding villages. I wonder whether this has something to do with the strange energy of the place or whether

that is simply due to my being in an unfamiliar town. I learn later that payday is when trouble is most likely to occur.

One of the reasons why people are in town today is to take their cut of the wages of their working relatives, their wantoks (literally, 'one talk' - people of the same language group who are considered to be related). PNG's is a 'sharing' culture based on family lines.

I see the wantok system in action when Tom Jumeraii, the agency's in-country project manager, and I visit a relative of his who manages the town's industrial gas depot. As we drive through the gates I see people waiting by the chainlink fence outside the yard. Tom explains that they are the wantoks of those who work inside and they expect a share of their pay. Tom, a highlander, has escaped the wantok culture by living in Lae. It is the way he talks about it that gives me the impression that he lost patience with the system some time ago.

Hagen town centre is not all that big. The place is laid out on a grid and consists for the most part of one and two-storey buildings. I wander down to the town market, curious about the range of produce that might be available and interested in finding out whether the drought has reduced food availability and pushed up prices. Today, though, is not market day. The market has only a handful of fruit and vegetable sellers. So much for my hopes of photographing tables stacked with produce.

There are unfamiliar vegetables and fruit here. What is that half-metre long thing that looks like a corn cob with red kernels? Or that mandarin-like fruit with green skin and the bundles of black seeds like large pawpaw seed? More familiar are the mangos.

I notice a few tables with women selling bilums that today, more often than not, are woven of synthetic, brightly-coloured polyester. The 'authentic' bilums, those woven of natural fibre, I later discover at the airport.

A strange sport

Tom talks to his waste metal collector and throws a few bags of aluminium cans into the vehicle. I open the door, get out and stand watching. This really is a weird sight.

"Darts is a very popular sport here", Tom says.

There, in front of us, forty or more large dart boards are set up in a line and a crowd of men stand waiting their turn to throw their projectiles. Darts is a quaint game I associate with placid English pubs. But here, isolated in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, are all these wild-looking, bearded Highlanders partaking enthusiastically of the game. I wonder how, were they to be transplanted to some rural English pub, they would go against the locals.

Waiting, waiting

Patience is a virtue in development work and people in the Pacific Islands operate to a different timetable than we in the West, but when they do not turn up at all it is a real bummer.

One of the reasons I am in Hagen is to meet with a group of village decision-makers from a community in the Wabag Valley.

Wabag is some distance to the west, further along the Hilans Hiway. I anticipate making the journey there with them and staying a few days to check out their request for a micro-hydroelectric system to bring power to the village. There are reportedly some works for an earlier scheme that was never completed and I want to assess whether these might be useful for a new system.

Some months before my visit, the villagers had made contact with APACE, the NGO I work for in Sydney, and expressed interest in obtaining a micro-hydroelectric turbine. They had learned that APACE had installed turbines in a number of Solomon Island villages and at Aguan in PNG. The Sydney office arranged for the Wabag people to meet me at Mt Hagen airport. From there I am to go with them to the Wabag Valley.

Tom and I drive out to the airport in the morning and wait... and wait some more. A couple passenger aircraft land and leave. With each flight, Tom asks people if they are the Wabag group. No luck. An MAF Cessna touches down gently and taxis to a stop but no one disembarks except the pilot.

We hang around inside the terminal building. We sit outside. We sit in the vehicle. we are becoming more pessimistic about the Wabag delegation as time goes on. We quaff a Coke and throw the empty cans into Tom's ute, an addition to his growing collection of waste metal that will eventually end up with a Brisbane metals recycling dealer.

Tom is a patient man but I can see that he is becoming impatient. We are puzzled about the group's failure to turn up. After some hours we go back into town to phone and fax the numbers we have as a contact for the Wabag people. They fail to answer. Later, we discover that the lines are down or that something else has preventing our messages getting through though. The cause is never quite clear.

Last day too late

Afternoon, and I make another attempt to get a message through to the Wabag contact number. We have faxed the address of the guest house where we are staying in Hagen so they can find us. Although my schedule has some flexibility, time is running out.

Morning. I decide to stay at the guest house just in case the Wabag people come. Tom goes out to collect waste metal. I persist because the NGO is eager to have another project in PNG and my visit to Wabag will be crucial in getting it started. On my report will ride a funding application to AusAID and a visit by engineers from the NGO to fully measure the hydro-electric potential of the site and devise a works plan.

Morning drifts into afternoon, afternoon to evening. A mission guest house is not the most lively venue in which to await visitors. It is quiet during the day, much as it is in the evening. Not much happens. I pass the time reading a title from the house's limited range of literature, the biography of an Australian missionary, and writing up my notes.

Still no sign of the Wabag people. I know that time is measured differently in Melanesia but this is ridiculous. I begin to suspect that the Wabag people are not merely late, that they are not coming at all.

Evening. Tom has not returned. Aware of the difficulty the man who turned up after the 7.30 curfew had in getting admission on our first night here, I stay up late, waiting. No sign of Tom. No sign of him next morning either. By now I am concerned that he has run into raskols again.

My flight to Port Moresby leaves this afternoon. I contemplate getting a ride to the airport on a public transport vehicle.

Tom walks in just a couple hours before my flight is due to leave. No, he had not run into a raskol gang. He has been out collecting waste metal and spent the night with friends.

With no sign of the Wabag group, with nothing heard, Tom says it is time to go. He drops me at the airport to catch my flight to Moresby.

I buy a traditional string bilum for Lisa, my co-worker in Sydney even though she already has a collection. The women array their bilums for sale on the airport's chainlink fence, hoping to catch the occasional tourist of which there seems to be very few. Close by, a Russian helicopter crew practices lifting logs on the end of a long cable suspended from the aircraft's belly. There are two Russian helicopters, a stubby one with two counter-rotating rotors and twin tail fins and a larger type with single rotor and clamshell doors at the rear. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, ex-military crews acquired aircraft and now offer their services to the logging industry for whom they lift logs from inaccessible country.

A large, four engined propeller-driven passenger aircraft lands and, with a tremendous noise, departs for one of the islands off the PNG north coast. The disembarked passengers depart and only a few people remain in the terminal building. More passengers turn up just before our flight lands.

Mt Hagen is a blotch of settlement amid green fields as we climb up and into cloud. Below passes a wonderful landscape of mountains and winding rivers.

After leaving me at the airport, Tom makes a journey further west along the Hilans Hiway. The road winds on to Mendi, then to Tari, but it has a bad reputation for holdups by raskols. After I return to Sydney I learn that Tom collected even more waste metal and returned to Lae, his utility full.

Later, back in Sydney, I am told that the village delegation claims it did turn up while I was in Hagen. Tom and I spent hours in search of them. I spent more hours waiting. If they were there they were certainly elusive. I doubt they were there at all.

DAY 10 to 11: Ambers Inn

THE GUARD swings open the gate as I arrive. Across the road, I notice the sign on a residence: “Lukaut! Dog hem kai-kai man”. Roughly translated from PNG Pijin, it means: Beware! The dog eats people”.

Ambers Inn is patronised by Australian development workers on stopover in Port Moresby. A two-level square with its own restaurant and swimming pool, Ambers is conveniently close to the airport and operates a van for arrivals and departures. With Australian aid and NGO activity in PNG worth millions, the proprietor is onto a good trade.

The swimming pool is full despite the drought and impending water shortages in Port Moresby. This is perplexing until a guest explains it to me: “This, after all, is PNG”. I take a dip.

The Australian drought relief team is in town and staying at Ambers. We study topographic maps in our discussions about the situation and I learn about the difficulties the Australian Navy is having delivering water to island communities in the Huon Gulf. I also learn more arcane stuff about the intricacies of using the lid of a Nescafe can to repair a water pump. This, from a farmer from Bilpin, west of Sydney. He is in PNG to sink wells. Mindful of raskols, we walk to the local restaurant in a group.

Back at Moresby airport, where all the lights and ceiling fans are now working, I pass Australian and New Zealand Air Force Hercules transports. They are here to make emergency supply drops as part of the drought relief effort. I board the QANTAS flight and we race down the airstrip to climb above the dusty city. A sharp turn to the south and we climb out over the waters of Torres Strait, bound for Brisbane.

Time wasted

When I left Sydney to spend a month with the Solomon Islands project I knew that I might have to go to Mt Hagen if the Sydney office managed to make arrangements with the Wabag people and if they made contact with Tom Jumeraii. They did both these things, but only the visit to Tom panned out. At least it gave me an insight into his project. It also kept AusAID happy when they finally received their report.

But what did I learn, I wonder, and was the journey worth it?

One thing I learned is that development assistance work in PNG requires great patience. I saw a little of the difficulties project managers face every day and learned the value of having someone like Tom Jumeraii running things.

I also saw the value of turning a waste product - non-ferrous metals - into a commodity and how giving monetary value to waste encourages people to treat it differently. I had seen how a small business can be built around waste recovery and how jobs can be created through recycling.

Waste is fast becoming a big issue in the Pacific Islands. Too much pollution becomes a public health issue. I know now that in a country with the population of PNG and buyers in Australia it is possible to use the market to solve waste issues, but how do you translate that to the smaller populations of the other Pacific Islands?

It is only a few hours flying time to Brisbane airport. We pass over the familiar city and start our descent, coming in over the waters of Moreton Bay. It is early afternoon, as it is in Port Moresby.

From here it is little more than an hour to Sydney and, as we pass over Northern NSW, I once again, for the first time in over five weeks, look out on country I know.



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