The origins of the conflict

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Deep in the Crown Prince Ranges of central Bougainville, the roar and hum of the world’s largest open-cut copper mine had not yet fallen silent. Australian accents echoed through the offices of Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) and drifted across the tennis courts of Arawa in the neat, flat coastal capital which had been purpose-built to service the mine. But somewhere in the dappled green jungle above the great gash of the Panguna mine, Francis Ona was at work. ‘The only one mad enough to take on BCL,’ Ona, the thirty-something surveyor from the Nasiol language group of Central Bougainville, had quit his job at the mine the previous year, 1988, to launch a campaign against the mine and the company who operated it. Claiming to speak on behalf of all Bougainvilleans affected by the huge copper mine that BCL had dug through his ancestral lands, Ona had formed the ‘New Panguna Landowners Association’ and delivered an ultimatum to the company: pay up 10 billion kina (A$14.7 billion (1989 value)) in compensation for the impact of the mine, or else.

BCL, 56 per cent owned by the Australian subsidiary Conzinc Rio Tinto, Australia (CRA) itself a subsidiary of the multinational mining company, RTZ and 20 per cent by the Papua New Guinea Government, reacted with disbelief. Panguna had only generated A$6.2 billion in sales in the past 16 years – but in doing so it had become the largest single source of revenue available to the PNG Government after Australian aid. Taxes from BCL alone accounted for 16 per cent of the young nation’s budget. They said no.

So a campaign of sabotage against BCL and ultimately the national government was launched. First there was a series of arson attacks, explosives were stolen from the mine and then, to the dismay of the miners and the surprise of everyone, the massive power pylons supporting the feeder lines along the mine-access road began to fall, their supports expertly blown away by one of the first of Ona’s recruits; a bright, young, Australian-
trained lieutenant from the Papua New Guinea Defence Force, Sam Kauona had joined the ‘holy war’. It had been a long time coming.

Early international involvement with Bougainville

Bougainville Copper Limited was just the latest in a series of outside elements which for more than two centuries had come to Bougainville’s shores to toss and turn the island and its people for their own intent.

Louis De Bougainville never actually set foot on the island that would eventually bear his moniker. High winds and strong currents forced the French explorer to make other plans that night, in 1768, when he anchored just off the coast of Buka, the smaller of the two main islands of Bougainville.

More than a century later, in 1889, an exchange of notes with the British brought Bougainville within Germany’s sphere of influence. This was to mean that the largest and richest island in the Solomon Islands chain was not available to be part of the new British Protectorate of Solomon Islands in 1893. Instead, the defeat of Germany in World War I saw Bougainville annexed to Australia’s New Guinea territories and after an initial, unsuccessful bid for independence, the island was subsumed into the state of Papua New Guinea, which gained its independence in 1975.

Papua New Guinea’s new independence Constitution had limited traditional land ownership – the anchor of Melanesian traditions – to just below the surface of the soil and awarded mineral rights to the state. For Bougainvilleans, their sense of separateness – physical, cultural and emotional – from Papua New Guinea had been fuelled by their particular experience of this policy; the presence of the giant copper mine and the use of the wealth it generated to pay for the development of the young nation-state. Although the mine brought many benefits unknown in other provinces to Bougainville, they had before them the contrast of the relative affluence of the expatriate mining community who lived within their midst. The mine had brought thousands of non-Bougainvilleans to the island. By far the majority of
the mine's workers were 'red-skins' from the island of New Guinea; their presence and their difference – physically from the black Bougainvillians and culturally – only serving to enhance the sense that the mine and all that came with it had been imposed upon the people of Bougainville.

**Tradition and development**

The complex thread of custom which had governed the lives of the Bougainvillians for millennia did not really begin to unravel until the arrival of the radically different Europeans at the end of the eighteenth century, although there is evidence of a Polynesian integration into Bougainville's Melanesian populace 33,000 or so years earlier. Until then the island's inhabitants had lived in small tribes, organised into households based on extended families, and their loyalties lay within these small groups. Only much later and quite reluctantly did these loyalties widen to their broader language groups, let alone to a national identity.

By the time of European contact, the island's 45,000 or so inhabitants provided for themselves by gardening, hunting and fishing. At variance with the practice in much but not all of the rest of the world, each person was identified according to their membership of their mother's clan, for it was the women of Bougainville who were the custodians of the land. The giant copper mine struck at the heart of this matriarchal structure. With their villages relocated and their lands despoiled by the wastes from the mine, by the time Francis Ona took up their cause, there were many women in Central Bougainville who felt completely disempowered in their role as land-owners.

'I can't pass the land on now because most of it has been covered up by the mine,' Patricia Dave said in 1988 as she stood among her grandchildren. 'The traditional system will never work again. The company has only paid the parents for this. What Ona is fighting for is that everybody, right down to the last born, should get compensation because our traditions have been broken and we will not be able to pass anything down to them.' It was this loss – the loss of land not to just one generation but to all the generations to come and all those that had been, that the miners did not seem to comprehend.

**Bougainvillean resistance deepens**

In their long socks, white shirts and uncomfortably tight shorts, the men of CRA had come, if not by stealth, then without permission. It was April Fool's Day, 1964, when the first of the company's geologists walked into Panguna Valley. More were to follow. A claim was pegged out before the owners of the land could even know what this meant. Neither could the miners foresee what lay ahead. Technology was changing; an open-cut mine of the scale which was being planned for Bougainville had never been tried before. Panguna was an experiment that would one day become the 'biggest jewel in the RTZ crown,' but also its greatest curse.

It was in 1882 that the first traces of copper, the substance that was to so define the island's future, were found after a ship's surgeon, attached to a British expedition to Solomon Islands, H.B. Guppy, managed to collect some ore from south-east Bougainville and declare 'copper will not improbably be found in association with these islands'. It would take a good part of a century for the import of Guppy's discovery to be felt although capitalism had already arrived on Bougainville a decade before him, when in 1871, another doctor of less salubrious repute, James Murray, began kidnapping Buka men for export to the cane fields of Queensland on Australia's north-east coast.

More noble intents led the Catholics, in 1902, to Bougainville but the advent of the Missionaries of the Catholic Society of Mary, or Marists as they were commonly known, had their own impact on Bougainvillians' traditional ways. Life before Christianity had been harsh. Inter-tribal warfare meant days marked by constant wariness, distrust and even death. The men were fully occupied guarding the women as they worked the garden or went fishing on the coast. The Marists brought with them a system of beliefs, which would gradually release many communities from this tyranny. They also brought education and new ideas, different from the colonial powers. There was never good synergy between Australia and its colonial charges on Bougainville, but the American priests were living proof of an alternative authority to the rough-shod Australian administration. Their belief in the intrinsic good of every man and their American concept of land ownership – so much closer to that of the Bougainvillians – empowered people to question, and ultimately resist much of the administration's clumsy attempts to 'civilise' them.

By the 1960s, Bougainvillians had withdrawn their labour from all foreign-owned plantations. Refusing to accept menial work for minimal wages, they would cut only their own copra. In 1962, a United Nations mission visited Bougainville. Members of Francis Ona's Naioi language group living on the coast of Keta told the visitors that they were unhappy with Australian rule. Matters weren't helped three years later, in 1965, when the Australian minister for External Territories, Charles Barnes, put in an appearance on the island only to abruptly declare that the Naioi, as the owners of the proposed mine site, could expect exactly 'nothing' for their land but would have to be content with the standard paltry compensation for lost properties such as houses and coconut palms.

The more the Australian administration insisted upon the construction of the copper mine – for the sake of the future state of Papua New Guinea they said – the more the issue of the mine and Bougainville's future political
status became inextricably mixed. In 1967, the Australian colonial administration – despite its role as a UN trustee of the territory – struck a deal with the Australian mining company: *the Bougainville Copper Agreement*.

The following year the first call for a referendum, including the option of secession, was made by a group of Bougainvillean students who, meeting in Port Moresby, formed the Mungkas Association. A year later, when land at Arawa was being purchased for the site of the mining town, the women whose land it was lay down in front of bulldozers and grappled with police in riot gear. The administration was forced to negotiate with the villagers over the price of the land at least.

When the Australian Prime Minister, John Gorton, made a fleeting visit, the Chairman of a recently formed opposition group, Paul Lapun, sought an 'official referendum to determine the future of Bougainville', an option Gorton immediately ruled out. The same year, Teori Tau, a Nasiol from Pakia village, challenged the colonial administration's right to compulsorily acquire their land before Australia's High Court. In a decision of the full court it was ruled that section 122 of the Australian *Constitution* empowered the Commonwealth Government to make such laws without having to provide 'just terms of acquisition'. The 'merciless intrusion' of CRA continued unabated.

By 1971 more than 1000 construction workers had come to the island. Eight years to the day after the first of CRA's geologist had walked in, production at the Panguna mine commenced. It was April Fools Day 1972. A schoolboy at Rigo High School, Francis Ona, watched as the first shipment of copper was loaded at the wharf. Like many Bougainvilleans that day, he sensed a greater import.

**Escalation of the conflict**

'Land to us is our lifeline and we cannot be separated from it,' Ona was to write in 1988 as he attempted to explain his anger and his despair. 'We are generally peace-loving, law-abiding people. At present we have been blamed for the lawlessness in the province. We have taken the move after painful struggle for the last 20 years of PNG rule. We are fighting to save our land from foreign exploitation.' He also spoke of dubious environmental practices at the mine, listing hazardous chemicals used on site (but always denied by the company) and the impact of the 'economic apartheid' practiced by BCL with a 'dual wage structure' that paid considerably lower rates to local employees. Significantly Ona was also angry with the older generation of landowners – including his own uncle, Matthew Kove, who had disappeared in suspicious circumstances months earlier – for what Ona claimed was the misuse and unfair distribution of the landowners' share of royalties from the mine.

As the violence spread, in Port Moresby and Canberra the race was on to vilify Ona, first as a disgruntled former employee, then as a 'hysterical extremist' and finally as 'mad' or even dead. Police Riot Squads were sent in by the national government to capture him – dead or alive – but this only served to broaden Ona's support. When members of these Highland-hardened squads raided villages and torched houses on the mine access road and committed other human rights abuses, Bougainvilleans were not cowed. They rallied against the national government.

Seemingly unaware of this growing backlash, in Port Moresby the Cabinet of Prime Minister Rabbie Namaliu approved a call-out by the PNG Defence Forces (PNGDF). In June 1989 a 28-day State of Emergency was declared and the first of a decade of futile and often ill-conceived military actions – Operation Blueprint – was launched. From Port Moresby the view was of a recalcitrant province led astray by a few troublemakers and criminal elements. On Bougainville the opposition to Port Moresby's rule was to grow so hard and fast that when a leading provincial politician, Hon John Bika, prepared a 'compromise' in 1989 that would have granted Bougainville a much greater level of autonomy, the solution devised by a hard core element of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army was to assassinate him in front of his family in the dead of the night.

Already the mine had been shut down, 16 people had died – three of them soldiers. The occupation of the island by the PNGDF had begun and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army had been born unleashing a wave, not only of politically motivated violence, but a ragtag criminal element of their precursors, the 'Rambos' who used the crisis to commit atrocities in its name. Soon after the mine ceased operating in May 1989, the army was given a freehand to try to quell the rebellion.

**Violence fractures Bougainville**

In a way Peter Tarupi was one of the lucky ones. Killed in August 1989, in front of his parents, at least there was witness to his death. According to their account, the young university student was struck repeatedly with wood and rifle butts by soldiers of the PNGDF. The post mortem examination found his spinal column had been completely severed.

At the time the Catholic Archbishop of Bougainville, Gregory Singkai spoke out against the atrocities and the behaviour of the PNGDF: 'They are really unruly and undisciplined. They are bashing people without questioning them and putting them in jail. They are destroying people's property, shooting cars, destroying their food gardens. People are really scared of them. Many innocent people, old people, women and children are being slaughtered.'

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In the end, there was no final burst of gunfire, no mad rush of expatriates to the airport but through a mixture of deception and disobedience, Bougainville, in the first half of 1990, slipped from Port Moresby's control. The mine was officially mothballed on 7 January 1990 but early negotiations led in March 1990 to a ceasefire being declared. The army quit as agreed, but then a decision by the Commissioner of Police and Controller of the State of Emergency, Paul Tohian, to withdraw the last thin line of ordinary officers on the ground, left Papua New Guinea without a single government official, politician or member of the security forces on the island.

It was no longer simply the copper mine that was in the hands of the BRA but the island’s airstrips, roads and even doorway security at the largest supermarket. It was not an absolute victory for the BRA nor was it a conclusive defeat for the government but from now on the Government only had two choices as to how it might return – with the permission of the BRA or by invasion. It chose the latter.

But first came a brutal blockade of the island. All air and sea transport was halted. The blockade, which was enforced by Australian-donated patrol boats, largely succeeded. Only the water border with Solomon Islands remained open. As medical supplies dried up and emergency evacuations became impossible, the blockade became responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians – many more than died as a result of the fighting.

On 17 May 1990, the Independent Republic of Bougainville was declared amid a day of celebrations, marches and speeches led by the self-proclaimed President, Francis Ona who announced that the ‘longstanding wish of the Bougainville people to become a separate nation’ had finally been granted. ‘From today Bougainville shall be forever a sovereign, democratic and independent nation.’ Port Moresby cut the islands last remaining telecommunications shortly after the announcement. The interim government, announced by Ona, included the former Premier Joseph Kabui as Minister of Justice and Sam Kauona as Minister for Defence. But the BRA were not at all prepared for their new role of maintaining law and order in the new de facto state.

As the 1990s progressed, anarchy bred anarchy and conflict spread throughout the island’s communities and language groups. With little left of traditional or modern structures which might have restrained them, elements of the BRA and others who claimed to be acting at their behest, committed murder, rape and robbery in the name of the ‘war’. Resistance forces armed by the PNGDF began to spring up as the more vigorous communities attempted to protect themselves from BRA attack.

Operating completely outside of the PNG Constitution but with local knowledge and kinship, they were to become one of the state’s most effective ‘weapons’. Bougainvilleans, whether resentful of a clansman’s prominence or coveting another’s land, whether wishing to avenge the death of an antecedent or the despoiling of a female relative leap into the lawless vacuum of civil strife, maiming and killing their own.

It was a time of terror, of wild unrestrained violence by a security force that had been sent to do an impossible job. Facing a Vietnam-like situation, the PNGDF not only failed in their stated task, but they demonstrated an alarming lack of discipline, training, planning and leadership. The terror started in 1989 with helicopters loaned by the Bougainville Copper Limited to the riot police. But the real trouble came in 1990 when Australia ‘gifted’ four ancient Iroquis to the PNGDF on condition that they would not be used in the offensive. It was then that villagers all over Bougainville realised that they must now live lives of constant vigilance. Strapping the helicopters with machine guns, the army had easily converted the gifts into gunships. As the months passed, thousands fled into the bush.

**Chan pursues a dual strategy**

By the time Julius Chan became the third Papua New Guinean prime minister to deal with the crisis in August 1994, hundreds of lives had been lost and thousands more spoiled. After the cluster and blunder of Prime Minister Paias Wingti’s term, which included the notorious ‘Operation High Speed’ push into Panguna, Julius Chan surprised the nation at his swearing-in by vowing to find a peaceful, lasting solution to the Bougainville conflict and flying off to Solomon Islands to meet with BRA’s Sam Kauona within the week. Chan’s first attempt to negotiate a comprehensive solution with the secessionists at the Arawa Peace Conference in October 1994 was not a resounding success, despite agreeing to their request for the United Nations to be present and cajoling the Australians into funding a small regional peacekeeping force. It did, however, lead the following year to the establishment of a Bougainville Transitional Government under the leadership of Theodore Miremung, a lawyer and former legal advisor to Francis Ona. But overall, Chan’s faith in the Bougainvillean leadership’s willingness to negotiate was never quite restored, nor did he ever really trust Miremung, who was not afraid to speak out against the atrocities still being committed by the PNGDF – like the summary execution of eight young men at the Pokaare centre in the north-west of Bougainville in June 1996.

Although publicly he persisted with peace talks, at the end of the year, Chan appointed a new commander to the PNGDF, the young colonel who had led Wingti’s ill-
fated ‘High Speed’ the year before, Jerry Singirok, with the job of commander dangling before his eyes, had assured Chan, privately, that he could do what no commander before him had managed – subdue the BRA and take control of Bougainville once again. In July the next year, under increasing pressure from Chan, he was put to the test launching ‘Operation High Speed II’ before flying off to Australia leaving his men to flounder and be slaughtered as they were comprehensively defeated on Aropa beach.

This humiliation was further compounded in September when 12 PNGDF soldiers were killed and a further five taken hostage at their camp at Kangu beach in south Bougainville and a month later, in October, when Theodore Miriung was assassinated by elements of the military using a vehicle disguised as an ambulance. As the end of his term loomed in 1996, with nothing to show on Bougainville but death and defeat, Julius Chan had run out of ideas. The principals of Sandline International, a London-based private military company began their first approaches to the desperate leaders of PNG. By the time Sandline’s front man, Tim Spicer, first saw the Panguna mine in early 1997, it was overgrown with almost a decade of disuse. But all these years later, the vastness of the mine and the violence of its intrusion were still apparent; the majestic green folds of the Crown Prince Ranges suddenly spaying outwards to reveal a vast, dark wound. It was this that PNG’s Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan, commissioned Spicer to bring back to life with the hiring of mercenaries to deploy against PNG’s own, albeit reluctant, citizens. Instead, Spicer’s attempts to wrest control of Bougainville from its own people and its destiny was to spell the political ruin of Julius Chan and with that, the end of efforts to resolve the crisis militarily; the beginnings of real negotiations for peace, nine years after Francis Ona first threw down the gauntlet.