**SOLDIERS WITHOUT GUNS PART 2 – PALMERSTON NORTH 9 JUNE 2022**

**[SLIDE 1]**

**Introduction**

When I agreed to Joe Hollander’s request last year to tell a follow-on story to my one on the Navy’s peace efforts in Bougainville in 1990, about the Truce Monitoring Group of 1997/98, I expected it to be a relatively easy task. After all, the Truce Monitoring Group arrived in Bougainville in October 1997 and after just five months was replaced by the Australian led Peace Monitoring Group.

So, the overarching narrative looked initially to be a very smooth one – trouble in Bougainville for almost ten years, New Zealand steps in and takes the lead, and five months later peace is essentially restored. However, a few weeks ago, as I started my reading, in books and online, following this lead and that, and disappearing down a variety of holes, it became clear that there was another story line – one that was more bumpy, complex and interesting. But it was a challenge to get together and, at times, I worried that I would run out of time.

And once again, the exercise highlighted for me, the truth that the shape of the stories we tell about events from the past, depends more on the perspective of the story teller and their response to those events, than it does on any ambition they may have to provide an accurate record of what actually happened.

As an aside, I think a stark example of this point is found in the history of the Second World War written by the renowned British historian Sir Max Hastings. In the book he writes, ‘*It is a remarkable and important statistic that 99 per cent of all ships which sailed from North America to Britain during the years arrived safely.’*  That may well be true, but the memory of seafarers as they reflected upon the fact that during the Battle of the Atlantic 36,000 merchant marinerswere killed and 3,500 merchant vessels sunk may be far more raw and less sanguine.

**[SLIDES 2/3]**

Here is one view of the Truce Monitoring Group and its place in the Bougainville story.

And this is another:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade recalling is – *‘The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s role was characterised by careful and skilled diplomacy, but also moments of risk, luck and opportunity…* O*ver time the personal integrity, commitment, and occasionally the bravery, of New Zealand’s diplomatic staff working in Port Moresby helped build the conditions required to start seriously working towards peace…At its heart, it is a story about New Zealand’s place in the Pacific, the way we work with our neighbours, and the values which underpin our diplomatic effort.’*

And various views are reflected in the description of the situation in Bougainville as (1) a war, or (2) a conflict, or (3) a crisis.

**The story’s form**

When I set out to put this story together, I was hoping it would take a simple linear form. I ended up, though with something more complex as I found out about the vital part played by people and how they responded to events and opportunities, how they created or inhibited opportunities. It was a matter of people overwhelming events, I think, more so than events overwhelming people.

I’ll briefly discuss the situation in Bougainville in 1997, then show you a list of events associated with Bougainville’s movement towards peace, then show you photographs of some of the people who feature in the Bougainville story. I’ll then cover the lead up to and deployment of the Truce Monitoring Group and the Peace Monitoring Group, and then subsequent events.

I’ll provide a bit more information on three key events – which I call ‘critical events’ - the Sandline Crisis, the shooting down of a helicopter with the New Zealand diplomat John Hayes onboard, and the Asian Financial Crisis. And I’ll touch on the vital role of the Bougainvillean women. Finally, I’ll look at the possibilities of Bougainville’s future.

**The situation in Bougainville in 1997[Slide 4]**

This slide is just to remind us that, at its heart, this story is about Bougainville and its people.

According to one source the years of conflict since 1989 cost the lives of about 20,000 people–more than 10 % of the population of 180,000. However, an Australian government publication reaches a more nuanced conclusion that, ‘*The protracted and violent conflict in Bougainville has caused the deaths of hundreds of soldiers and rebels and an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 civilians, either from the fighting or from disease and deprivation.’*

In addition to the deaths, more than 50 % of the population became displaced. The infrastructure broke down completely; whole villages were burned to the ground. Massive human rights violations – murder, torture, rape, and disappearances – became daily occurrences.

Internationally supported peace initiatives in late 1994 and early 1996 had been derailed by Bougainville Revolutionary Army(BRA) hardliners and rogue Papua New Guinea Defence Force elements. Violence between rebels, the security forces, pro-government groups and armed criminal gangs had taken on the character of a civil war**.**

By early 1997, however, the feeling within the BRA was that they had the military advantage on Bougainville. They had, in the words of one of their commanders, ‘*overcome all that PNG had been able to throw at us.*’ – and so now, having attained a position of strength, was the time to negotiate with the government. Providing additional compulsion to move to the table was that at the senior levels of the BRA, it was felt that ‘*we could not keep on fighting and fighting. The time had come to speak out and make our cries heard, and in particular to let those in the international community know how we felt and why we had struggled.*’

There was no doubt that conditions on the island for the people was not sustainable. They were in desperate need of medical supplies, and few schools were operating. Furthermore, there was an overwhelming desire for peace within the community.

As former North Solomons provincial government official and a peace process officer Robert Tapi recalls:

*‘The silent majority of Bougainvilleans were tired of war and longed to return to normal village life. Women’s groups, church groups and chiefs increased the pressure on both the BRA and the PNG-backed Bougainville Transitional Government to negotiate for peace.’*

On all sides, the likely cost of victory was proving too high. The moderate revolutionary leaders realised that even if they did “win”, they “would inherit a hopelessly divided society”.

The reality was that things had reached the point at which peace had assumed, for the vast majority of people, a far higher priority than independence. Then came a ‘critical point’ the Sandline Affair.

**Some of the people who feature in the Bougainville story[Slide 5 – 14]**

I would like to now just briefly acknowledge that people sit at the centre of this story – and so here are just some of those who feature in it.

**The Sandline Affair**

Now to turn to the Sandline Affair.

On becoming Prime Minister in August 1994, peace on Bougainville had been the main objective of the Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan. While he adopted a number of different strategies to achieve this, his efforts ended up achieving little. Having originally rejected the mercenary option in September 1996, the frustrations generated by successive breakdowns in negotiations with rebels, a series of humiliating military set-backs, including the Kangu Beach Massacre in June 1996 in which 12 PNGDF and police personnel were killed and five taken hostage, and the prospect of an imminent general election, caused him to change his mind in late 1996 about how peace might be achieved.

The Sandline proposal was first made public in an article published on 22 February 1997 by Australian journalist Mary-Louise O'Callaghan. In it, she revealed that the Papua New Guinea government had signed a contract with Sandline International, a private military company based in London, to 'blast' the leadership of the BRA. At the time, Chan, and his Defence Minister, denied that Sandline personnel were to be employed to attack the BRA, saying that they would be engaged only in a training capacity.

The Australian government made public their opposition to the Sandline proposals, expressing concern about both the introduction of mercenaries into the Pacific and any return to what it saw as the counter-productive attempts to resolve the Bougainville conflict by reliance on military force.

Contrary to Chan’s claims though, the contract with Sandline envisaged a military strike by contracted foreign soldiers, working with the PNGDF, against key BRA leaders, destroying their communications, logistics capability, and re-capturing the Panguna mine. The cost of the contract for the PNG government was estimated to be thirty-six million United States dollars.

On 16 March, the Commander of the PNGDF, Brigadier General Singirok, stopped PNGDF involvement in the Sandline operations. He ordered the detention of all Sandline personnel by PNGDF members in the evening of that day. The following day, in a public act of defiance of the government, Singirok spoke on national radio, calling for the resignations of the prime minister, deputy prime minister and defence minister.

Chan responded almost immediately by dismissing Singirok from his post, accusing him of 'gross insubordination bordering on treason', and appointing a new acting Commander. There was, however, widespread public support for Singirok, whose objections to the employment of mercenaries and allegations of corruption resonated within the community. In the week following 17 March, Sandline personnel were forced to leave the country.

At this stage, the Australian government attempted in various ways to persuade both Chan and Singirok to exercise restraint, and maintained strong pressure on Chan to explore options other than the use of mercenaries to resolve the situation on Bougainville.

On 25 March, with angry crowds surrounding the National Parliament, members of parliament rejected a motion calling on the prime minister, deputy prime minister and defence minister to resign. The next day, while not resigning, the three agreed to 'step aside' pending the outcome of a commission of inquiry into the Sandline contract.

It seems to be generally agreed, that had that contract gone ahead, it would have resulted in large-scale violence, and potentially inflamed and protracted the conflict on Bougainville. In addition, the economic and political dealings which took place as part of the Sandline deal, particularly those surrounding the Panguna Mine, could have been adversely affected PNG's long-term interests.

Instead, the collapse of the Sandline deal effectively ended any option of a military solution for Bougainville. Singirok's actions and the controlled involvement of the PNGDF throughout the crisis also resulted in a more positive perception of the PNGDF among Bougainvilleans. This contributed to the emergence of more moderate BRA/Bougainville Interim Government and PNG government leaders, and so opened up opportunities to make substantial progress towards peace.

Chan’s defeat in the July election was another important factor in changing the mind sets of the various parties. Bougainvilleans and the PNG Government, under the newly elected Prime Minister Bill Skate, were now ready for peace negotiations. With a multitude of small steps marking the past, they were now hopeful for some big ones to shape the future. **(Whiteboard)**

**Burnham 1**

New Zealand’s Foreign Minister, Don McKinnon, supported by his Australian counterpart, Alexander Downer, stepped forward and took the leading role in grasping the opportunity presented by the shift in the strategic context. I wondered what McKinnon’s motivation to get involved might be – beyond a wish for a secure and stable Pacific; and noting that the tendency had been for Australia to focus on Melanesian matters and New Zealand on Polynesian ones.

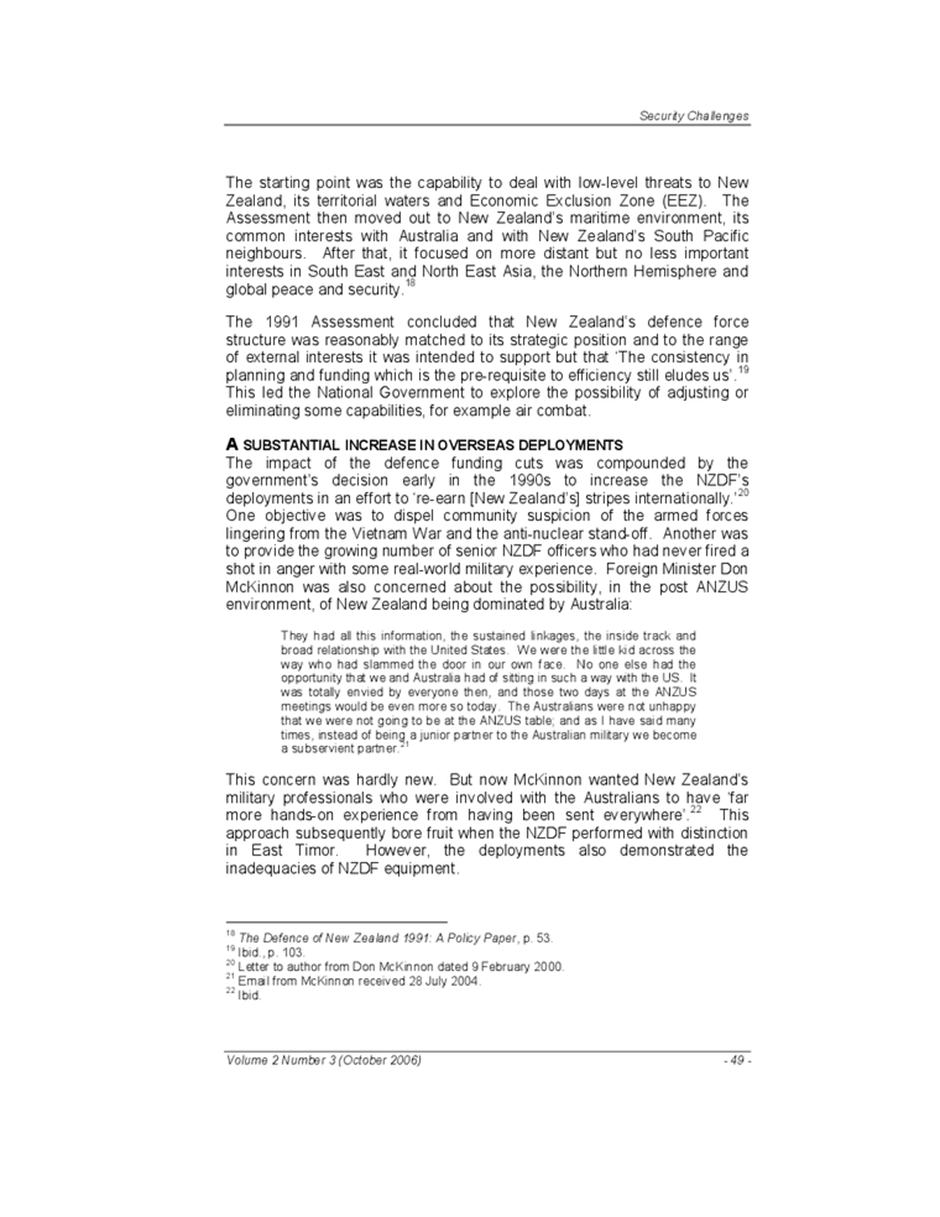
I think there were two other compelling factors.

The first was his personal background. His father was Major General Walter Sneddon McKinnon, CB, CBE, who died in 1998. He had joined the NZ Army in 1935, and served in the Second World War with various artillery units of the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force. After the war, he held a series of senior positions in the Army, ending his career as Chief of the General Staff from 1965 to 1967. This background would, inevitably, have shaped McKinnon’s ‘world view’.

The second was his view of the New Zealand – Australia relationship. A Canterbury University Masters student, Rosemary Baird, in her 2008 thesis, ‘Australia’s And New Zealand’s Regional Peacekeeping’, writes:

*‘The important theme which emerges from this overview of Australian and New Zealand defence interaction is that it is simultaneously close and divergent. Because of their geographic proximity, shared British heritage, cultural similarity and inter-migration Australia and New Zealand do have broadly complementary views on defence. Generally, however, threats and conflicts do draw the Australian and New Zealand Defence Forces closer together. Australia’s and New Zealand’s defence relationship is one of siblings, not friends: sometimes clingy and familial, at other times estranged and resentful, but generally united in the face of outside danger.’*

And, I found this article written in 2006 by Derek Quigley, who had served in Government with McKinnon, which provides further insights into McKinnon’s thinking.



In any event, with Papua New Guinea’s agreement, and informal contact having been initially established between the parties to the conflict on Bougainville, New Zealand’s role moved into a more formal phase with the agreement to hold talks in New Zealand. Burnham Army Camp, outside of Christchurch, was identified as a suitable and secure location for the talks.

The talks lasted from 3 to 18 July. They were attended by representatives of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, of the Bougainville Interim Government, and of the Bougainville Transitional Government, as well as civil society leaders. Although no-one was there from the central government of PNG, they knew of the talks and had given their approval for them to proceed.

New Zealand had brought the Bougainville parties, around 70 delegates, to New Zealand using the RNZAF. However, prior to them flying to New Zealand, there had been a second ‘critical point’.

The New Zealand diplomat John Hayes, was flying in a helicopter around Bougainville to uplift delegates. As the aircraft moved into land near to an area occupied by Francis Ona loyalists, it came under fire and was forced to land. Hayes reported the incident as a ‘mechanical failure’, keeping silent on the fact that the aircraft had been attacked. As a consequence of the shooting, and his very measured response, a clear message was sent to the Bougainvilleans that a New Zealander had been willing to risk his life in an effort to bring them together – and to be silent in the immediate aftermath of the incident about the danger to which he had been exposed. This sent a powerful message and helped commit the leadership of both sides to a constructive approach to the talks.

An interesting shadow to this incident. was the role played by an Australian, Rosemarie Gillespie; who died in 2010. She has been described as, *‘a lawyer, human rights activist, author and film producer, who was active in human rights causes in Australia, the USA, Melanesia, the Pacific Islands and the Middle East for more than forty years.*’

When Francis Ona told her of the plan to meet in Burnham, she was heard to tell him over the phone that it was not the time to negotiate, and he should only adopt this course when she told him to do so. As Sam Kauona remembers, ‘.. *one of the reasons that caused Francis to reject peace was that Rosemary Gillespie reinforced his views on the military option as a complete way of achieving Bougainville’s aspiration…Now, why Rosemary was so influential over Francis is a question that remains a mystery to us.’*

The Australian Quakers Journal of September 2016 said of her, *‘She never let controversy stop her from doing what she saw as right for humanity.’* Clearly, she also never let the human cost stop her. As the philosopher once said, ‘yesterday I was clever and wanted to change the world. Today I’m wise and want to change myself. Gillespie may have been clever, but I’m unconvinced that she was wise.

New Zealand was careful not to impose solutions or time limits on the Burnham talks. As a result, there was no set agenda. The two weeks they lasted turned out to be worthwhile. They produced the Burnham Declaration, which included a ceasefire. It committed the parties to seek unity and reconciliation among the Bougainvillean people, and to work with the Government of PNG to set up a process of negotiations between the leaders of Bougainville and PNG.

Another agreement was reached, the Bougainville Interim Government and the BRA announced that they would release five PNGDF soldiers they had been holding as prisoners for nearly a year. They were handed over to a New Zealand representative by the BRA and then boarded the HMNZS *Canterbury* for return to Port Moresby.

**Burnham 2**

The second round of talks got under way on 1 October, 1997. This time Australia provided the transport for the Bougainville participants. An Australian Department of Foreign Affairs official was present at Burnham throughout the talks; although he, like the New Zealand officials, was not an active participant in the talks.

This time representatives of the Papua New Guinea Government, including the Deputy Commissioner of Police and the Commander of the PNG Defence Force, were at the talks. A group also came from the Solomons. This presented an interesting logistics problem because the Solomons delegation, which included a former Governor-General, was not formally part of the negotiations. The Government resolved this by accommodating the Solomons delegation in Christchurch, while the PNG officials and the Bougainvilleans were at Burnham. In the end, the Solomons Home Affairs Minister, Leslie Boseto, chaired the talks - and a subsequent meeting in Cairns.

The main outcome of Burnham 2, was the Burnham Truce. It set up the Truce Monitoring Group(TMG), the deployment of which to Bougainville was named Operation Bel Isi.

**The Truce Monitoring Group**

From the outset, it was agreed that New Zealand would make up a substantial part of the TMG, and lead it. It was also agreed that Pacific Island(Melanesian) country participation was critical. According to Joseph Kabui:

*‘NZ leadership was another thing that made it less likely that Francis(Ona) would be a threat. This was one of the reasons Australia could not have led the TMG. Francis Ona would have come out shooting. None of the Bougainville leaders. Nor grassroots Bougainvilleans, would have accepted Australian leadership.’*

The initial element of the TMG arrived in Bougainville in October - it was a 30 strong team of New Zealand and Australian Defence Force people led by New Zealander Colonel Clive Lilley. They arrived in Bougainville in two separate groups. According to a NZ Army officer who was a member of the party:

*‘Following the arrival of the Australians there was some friendly posturing between the Australians and New Zealanders. The Australians wanted a delayed and fully planned approach to Arawa, with us opting to move immediately. The New Zealand approach was to maximise exposure of the TMG to the greatest possible number of Bougainvilleans in the shortest possible time.’*

The TMG itself, led by Brigadier Mortlock, was deployed into Bougainville on 6 December 1997. Its strength was around 250 personnel - 120 NZDF personnel, and around 20 military/police personnel from Fiji and Vanuatu. Australia provided between 90 and 110 personnel over the period from December 1997 to March 1998, with 15 to 20 of these participants being civilians. The Deputy Commander of the TMG was an Australian civilian, James Batley.

Additionally, a detachment of Iroquois helicopters was deployed for six months from November, departing from Bougainville in April 1998, and for varying periods HMNZ Ships *Canterbury, Manawanui and Endeavour* supported the operation.

The PNG Defence Force kept a battalion of soldiers on the island. In the words of Brigadier Mortlock, *‘Those soldiers did nothing, just stayed in their compound, played sport, that sort of thing, to give the peace accord a chance to work. I admire them for that.*’

In simple terms, the task of the TMG was to establish a secure atmosphere in which Bougainvilleans could forge their own peaceful solution to the conflict.

It was agreed with the Bougainvilleans that, while the Australians would provide the bulk of the logistics support, military personnel from Australia would, at least initially, be restricted to the logistics areas. However, while New Zealanders and the other contributing nations would provide most of the monitors in the field, Australia was welcome to include civilian monitors in the field teams.

In fact, at the outset of the TMG in late 1997, the BRA refused to sanction the participation of ADF uniformed personnel (though civilian personnel from Defence were acceptable). It was not until after the initial rotation of personnel that enough trust had been built to allow for ADF participation, and in the end for Australian leadership of the Peace Monitoring Group.

The TMG operated out of four bases, out of which they drove, walked or were flown into villages; many of them remote and part way up mountains. They stressed to the Bougainvilleans that they were on the island to provide a stable environment for peace, and attended dozens of meetings and ceremonies to make themselves, and their mission, known.

Although its life was short, the TMG had a positive impact on the course upon which Bougainville was set.

Helen Hakena, one of the leading women in the Bougainville Peace Movement said:

*‘In addition to creating an environment in which fighting between the BRA and PNGDF was no longer possible, the TMG bridged gaps and hatred between clans, villages, relatives and even churches which in one way or another were involved in the crisis.’*

It has also been said that, ‘*It was an opportunity for peace for the PNGDF no less than it was for Bougainvilleans.’* And that, *‘The TMG kept the warring parties apart physically, and it provided the link that allowed them to start communicating.’* And, ‘*The TMG provided a window into what everyone was doing in Bougainville and that meant everyone could be held accountable for their actions.’*

It is important, though, to acknowledge the Bougainville perspective, captured by Sam Kauona:

*‘Overall the TMG-Bougainville relationship was excellent. We felt responsible because we had ownership of the peace process and we invited them to the island as our guests.’*

**The Lincoln Agreement**

In January 1998, Don McKinnon convened another round of talks in Christchurch, and oversaw the negotiation of the Lincoln Agreement. This extended the truce to a permanent and irrevocable ceasefire on 30 April, and established the Australian-led Peace Monitoring Group to replace the TMG, as well as the creation of the Bougainville Reconciliation Government. A process for weapons disposal, the withdrawal of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force from Bougainville, and the granting of amnesties and pardons were also agreed.

**Meeting in Canberra**

After a further round of negotiations – this time in Canberra in March 1998 – and with the beginning of the permanent cease-fire at the end of April, the character of TMG changed, in particular New Zealand’s role, and it was replaced by the Peace Monitoring Group. NZDF personnel were reduced from 220 to only 30, and Australia took over the leadership, with the agreement of all parties, in spite of the reservations against Australia that still existed because of its role in the crisis.

**The Peace Monitoring Group**

The PMG initially consisted of about 300 personnel, including 90 peace monitors and about 200 support personnel. The majority, between 240 and 250, of the PMG’s personnel were Australian.

As late as July 1998, three months after the establishment of the PMG, issues with monitoring operations and morale remained apparent. Interestingly, in his book on Bougainville operations, Australian Colonel Bob Breen attributes much of the internal friction and insensitive behaviour regarding political and cultural issues, to poor personnel selection and inadequate pre-deployment training on the part of the Australian and New Zealand contingents. An obvious part of the problem, he writes, was the disorganised transition from the TMG to the PMG, typified by the fact that ‘no Australians who had served with the TMG were invited to brief the next rotation of personnel . . . on conditions in Bougainville.’

After 2000, the PMG was reduced to 200 personnel. And, following the Arawa Peace Agreement in August 2001, the PMG focused on facilitating the weapons disposal pillar of the agreement, instilling community confidence, and promoting the implementation of the agreement in cooperation with a small United Nations observer mission.

From late June 2003, the PMG was replaced by a small Bougainville Transition Team of 17 unarmed civilians that operated until the end of the year. A major success of the PMG was its contribution to providing the PNG Government with sufficient confidence to gazette the Constitution for the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in December 2004, and the region held successful elections in June 2005.

**The ANZAC Relationship works despite the differences**

According to Rosemary Baird, ‘…*conflict and disharmony between trans-Tasman representatives, in particular the military forces, is the untold story of the Bougainville peace process.*(and)..*’the TMG* (was) *an exception to general military practice where a coalition is led by the larger and wealthier nation.’*

As alluded to by McKinnon, the Australia-New Zealand defence relationship was tense in 1997 – in large measure because of what the Australians considered to be New Zealand’s low level of defence spending. Because of these Australian concerns, New Zealand’s early attempts to involve the Australian Defence Force in an operation in Bougainville were rejected.

The Australian Chief of Defence Force, General John Baker, and his senior defence officials were unenthusiastic. They made it clear that the ADF wanted nothing to do with a New Zealand-led operation. Australian Department of Defence civilians were unsupportive.

Some of the Australian senior officers assessed that the NZDF’s planning and style of operation was backward and unprofessional. There was a genuine concern that New Zealand had run down its defence capacity and was incapable of managing the Bougainville operation. As Brigadier Mortlock admitted, ‘*There were many reasons that made the inclusion of Australia essential, not the least of which was the inadequacy of our own logistics capability…New Zealand alone did not have the capacity to provide full logistics support*.’

The two military forces had different approaches to risk management – and different risk appetites. The Australians expected to have reliable 24-hour radio communication and vehicles driven by qualified drivers. The NZDF, probably because of its lack of resources, was content to deploy without such necessities. The New Zealand military radios and jeeps were untrustworthy and potentially unsafe; a situation which worried Australian communications and transport officers.

Rosemary Baird records that:

*‘This difference in approach was demonstrated when the Australian-led PMG took over in 1998 and immediately put in place a force which was larger and better equipped than the TMG. Indeed, a major operational problem for the New Zealand and Australian forces in Bougainville was the NZDF’s inadequate provision of equipment, resources and personnel. New Zealand did not have the capacity to provide communications for the TMG…The Land Rovers New Zealand sent with the TMG, were notoriously dreadful: rusted, dangerous and unroadworthy. .. the vehicles were assessed by the Royal Australian Mechanical Engineers (RAME) as unsafe.’*

She concludes that:

*‘In spite of these tensions between the two nations, many New Zealanders and Australians chose to focus on the positives rather than the negatives of the TMG. It is perhaps to be expected that Australia’s Foreign Minister, Downer, only mentioned the close collaboration between Australia and New Zealand in the Bougainville peace process in his official publication on Bougainville. However, even in individual interviews, New Zealand participants in particular, glossed over trans-Tasman discord. Perhaps this occurred because of the popular perception of Bougainville as a successful operation.’*

**The Asian Financial Crisis – and New Zealand risks throwing away all that has been gained**

The Asian financial crisis is the third critical point. It was a period of financial crisis that gripped much of East Asia and Southeast Asia beginning in July 1997, and it raised fears of a worldwide economic meltdown due to financial contagion. The direct effect on the New Zealand economy was adverse and substantial, and looked likely to continue for some time. The indirect effect, through business and household sector confidence, was also significant

In response, when Jenny Shipley ousted Jim Bolger as Prime Minister in December 1997, she made several decisions to cut government costs, one of which was to substantially reduce New Zealand’s contribution to operations in Bougainville. Don McKinnon said he did not want to have to pull out from Bougainville, but was ‘crunched by the Treasury’.

As a consequence of New Zealand’s decisions, and without officially consulting the ADF, the NZDF appeared to also be defaulting on its logistical obligations. The NZDF also pulled out SAS personnel who were vital to guaranteeing the teams’ security.

There is a view that*, ‘All members of the TMG experienced unnecessary hardship and danger because of the New Zealand government’s decision. And when New Zealand defaulted on its logistical and personnel commitments during the second rotation of the TMG, young New Zealanders and Australians on the ground were drawn closer together in shared adversity.’*

In April 1998, according to Sam Kauona, *‘a strong sense of rejection was felt, when the NZ government handed the monitoring role to the Australians. There was an accusation then that New Zealand must have collaborated with Australia to hand over the peace process to Australia. We were of course very concerned when the TMG came to an end, the PMG arrived and Australia took over the lead. But that concern was less to do with the Australians themselves, and more a worry that we did not know why New Zealand was leaving and pulling out most of its personnel.’*

In this context, I don’t think it is unfair to the New Zealand memory of Bougainville, and our contribution to its peace, to reflect on the words in the prayer by the noted 16th century English seafarer, Admiral Sir Francis Drake:

*‘There must be a beginning of any great matter, but the continuing unto the end until it be thoroughly finished yields the true glory.’*

**The role of women**

Most social groups in Bougainville are matrilineal societies. This means that kinship and the inheritance of land rights and decisions about land use are determined in terms of matrilineal lines – children take their mother’s surname, and women have controlled much of the farming and trading.

The war affected women in the government and BRA controlled areas differently. For those women in the BRA controlled areas, seven years of a blockade deprived them of their access to health care, education, shelter, security and food and clothing. Before the crisis they had enjoyed among the best medical and educational systems in the Pacific.

Lieutenant Colonel Janet Castell, who served with the TMG, observed that the women *‘knew they had to reinstate some form of health care, education, and roading system. They knew they had to reconcile the differences that had originally led to the conflict, and they had to reconcile amongst themselves, which was often difficult, too.’*

Women's groups played a major role in working for peace and reconciliation at local and national levels. Individual women used their high status in the family to negotiate peace in their communities and managed to use their influence as go-betweens with the warring factions to maintain constructive dialogue. Mothers went into the bush to attempt to bring their sons home. In south and southwest Bougainville, women went into the jungle to negotiate with the local BRA.

Their activities included prayer meetings, reconciliation ceremonies, peace marches and petitions. They also played an important role in awakening the international community to the suffering of the Bougainville people. Their contacts with women from Australia and New Zealand were influential in bringing in support and assistance from abroad.

**Bougainville today**

Bougainville’s economy remains weak with its government still financially dependent on Papua New Guinea and international aid donors. Meanwhile, its people continue to struggle. Bougainville has one hospital and 35 health centres of varying sizes for a population of 300,000 people. The maternal mortality rate is estimated to be up to three times higher than in PNG, where it is already among the worst in the world, with 230 deaths per 100,000 live births.

The PNG National Research Institute estimates that the island has a GDP per capita of approximately $1,100 dollars US. This would place a newly independent Bougainville among the ranks of countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, and Somalia, which face notable challenges in poverty, health, and stability. Approximately 85 per cent of the Bougainville government’s revenue is from Papua New Guinea; an extreme dependence on this external support.

**The Panguna Mine Today**

On 6 May this year it was announced that:

*‘The controversial Panguna mine, which lay derelict for more than 30 years following the eruption of a civil war on the remote islands of Bougainville – now an autonomous region of about 300,000 people in eastern Papua New Guinea– is set to be revived to support the region’s plans for nationhood.*

*The Autonomous Bougainville Government has secured an agreement with local landowners to move ahead with plans to reopen the vast open-cut copper mine in the central mountains of Bougainville Island that was at the centre of a destructive decade-long conflict between Bougainville and Papua New Guinea that ended in 2001.’*

However, the private sector may be reluctant to invest in re-starting the mine given the likely cost - estimated to be in the region of $4 billion – and the potentially hostile community responses.

**Shaping the future for Bougainville**

Bougainville President, Ishmael Toroama, has said:

***Bougainville’s political aspirations on independence must never be compromised if Bougainvilleans wish to fulfil the choice by 97.7% of the people who opted for independence from Papua New Guinea in the 2019 Bougainville Referendum.***

Papua New Guinea's government has accepted the result, despite concerns that Bougainville's departure could cause the ethnically and linguistically diverse country to fracture. But it has so far refused to commit to full independence.

In April this year, Bougainville's quest for independence from Papua New Guinea inched closer with both governments endorsing a key document. At the Joint Supervisory Body meeting in Port Moresby both governments committed to the Era Kone Covenant which sets out how the independence referendum results will be tabled in the national parliament, and the manner in which that institution may ratify the results.

President Toroama remains positive about the future for Bougainville and is confident that both governments together have *‘developed a decisive path on the future political status of Bougainville.’* And, the pressure is on the PNG government - Bougainville's leaders have set a deadline of 2027 to gain full independence from Papua New Guinea.

**Two possible futures**

Bougainville faces two possible futures – each quite different in form but potentially alike in their outcomes.

In one, if the Papua New Guinea government does not agree to independence, then according to one commentator, ‘*guns could come out of hiding, guns could come back from the Solomon Islands and warlords once again have a large following.’*

In the other, another commentator’s view is that, *‘in the event of an independence vote and a negotiated settlement on independence reached with PNG, Bougainville would require substantial assistance from both PNG and external partners such as Australia in making the transition to independence and fiscal self-reliance. Yet to date, there is scant evidence of planning for such a transition, if that is the outcome of the referendum and negotiations.’*

A United States publication in October 2013 concluded that, ‘*A Bougainville government that does not have the resources—or the oversight capacity—to provide basic services to its population would be a grave threat to stability.’*

I do not know whether the bird I can just see circling high in the sky above Bougainville is a dove – or whether it is a hawk.