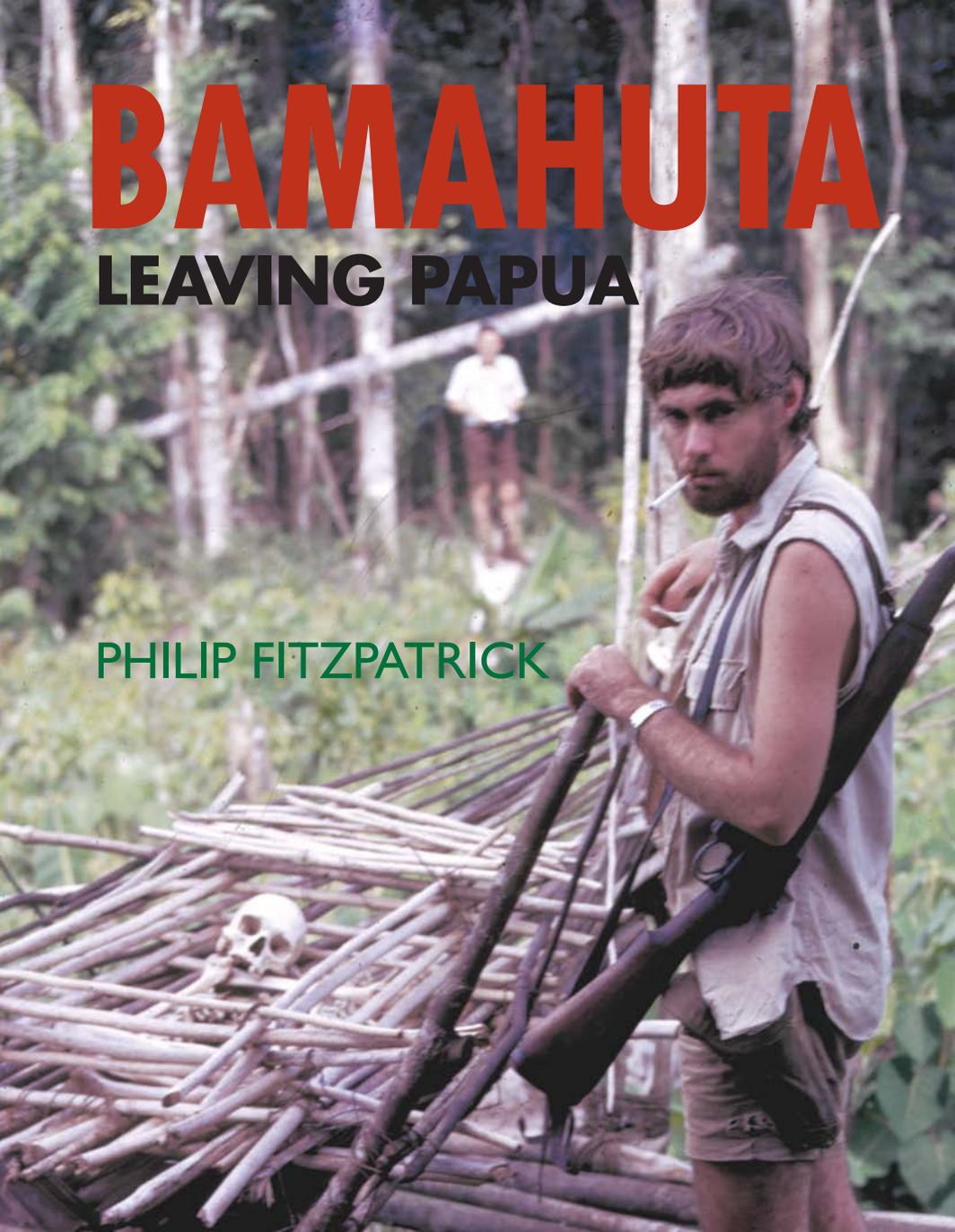


BAMAHUTA

LEAVING PAPUA

PHILIP FITZPATRICK



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*This book is dedicated to my wife, Sue,
who always groans when I mention Papua New Guinea*

*and to Kure Whan, my old cook,
who passed away a couple of years ago.*

Preface

Most of this story is true. I've changed a few names and shuffled a couple of events around in the hope of confusing anyone who might take offence. One of the problems writing about events that happened only thirty years ago is that many of the people involved are still alive. Some of the older villains, in fact, seem to be refusing to die. A number of characters are fictitious and one or two things didn't quite happen in the way I've described. I won't say who or what; I think this is my privilege to know and the reader's to wonder. If I've misrepresented anything or caused unnecessary offence to anyone I am truly sorry.

My aim has been to recreate the mood amongst the expatriates in Papua New Guinea, particularly the Patrol Officers, in those years leading up to Self Government and Independence. That period means a great deal to the Australians who were there. The rest of Australia didn't, and still doesn't, seem to care very much about Papua New Guinea.

There was always an unspoken rivalry between the Administration staff in Papua and those in New Guinea. This dates to before World War Two when they were administered separately. Papua has always been the older and poorer relative, which is part of the reason why I like the place, and why most of this book is centered there.

Parts of chapters 3 and 9 first appeared in a slightly different form in the old 1970s *Man* Magazine. Part of chapter 7 also appeared in a 1970s publication called *4x4 Australia*. Most recently *Una Voce*, the journal of the Papua New Guinea Association of Australia published two parts of chapter 5.

A lot of people have contributed to this book, many of them unknowingly. Some of them might recognize their unwitting contributions and recall my apparently innocent questions. There are a couple of people I would like to thank by name however. The first is Marie Clifton-Bassett. Marie was the editor of *Una Voce* when I tried out a few extracts from the 'work in progress' on her readers. Her positive response was the encouragement I needed to finish the book. The other is Donald Denoon from the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the ANU. Apart from correcting some factual errors and pointing out spelling mistakes he taught me, mostly via email, about economy of style and basic editing. Thanks to Pandanus Books for their help in bringing the manuscript to publication.

Philip Fitzpatrick

CHAPTER ONE

We were sitting ducks on the airstrip and I decided our best option was to make a run for it. I reasoned that if we were mobile we might stand a better chance. I called to the carpenters and cooks sitting smoking under the tailgate of the truck. ‘Let’s get the hell out of here; where’s the driver?’

‘Right here.’

‘We’re going; unlock the door. I’ve got a funny feeling we’re being set up.’

I climbed into the truck and pushed the metal mail tin containing the payroll under my feet. Peter Mantilla, the driver, leaned out of his window and shouted at the men in the back.

‘Hang on; we’re not stopping for anything!’ The men shuffled around among the boxes of groceries and supplies, clearing spaces near the side rails so they could hang on. They had done this sort of thing before.

‘Go,’ I said, and Peter planted his foot on the accelerator.

The usual procedure for collecting the payroll for the seismic survey camp had come unstuck. The payroll came into Waro airstrip every alternate Wednesday on the same aircraft that

carried the weekly rations and any exchange field crew. The arrival of the rations and payroll was flagged at the evening camp meeting so that a vehicle and helicopter were available. The trick with the payroll was to get it out of the aeroplane and into the waiting chopper as quickly as possible.

When I left the camp for the airstrip that morning I was reasonably sure everything was working to plan. I had double-checked with the party chief and the radio operator to make sure. The seismic camp was near Ai'io, a village south of the oilfield at Moro on the shores of Lake Kutubu in the Southern Highlands. The airstrip was about an hour's drive north-west at the end of the Hedinia valley.

When we got to Waro airstrip we parked the truck in the parking bay. I walked to some houses in the village adjacent to the airstrip with Timothy, the camp cook, and we bought several hands of bananas. One of the men casually mentioned that *raskols* from Komo were hanging around the village. At the time I didn't make the connection but several days earlier there had been an incident involving two Komo men following one of our recording crews through the bush and camping near them. When I heard this I contacted the police at Moro to have them moved on, but the party chief got in before me and had them escorted away.

Timothy and I wandered back to the airstrip just as the Twin Otter arrived with our rations and payroll on board. Peter backed the truck up to the Otter and we loaded the rations. We tossed a number of empty eskies and other surplus equipment into the plane for return to Mount Hagen. The pilot was fiddling around under the fuselage where a stone that had flicked up off the airstrip had damaged a fuel test valve and started it leaking. I leaned

underneath the plane and handed him my Leatherman. He flicked the handles back and twisted the valve with the pliers. The dripping fuel slowly dried up.

‘That did the trick,’ he said.

‘Don’t mention it,’ I replied. ‘Is it okay to use the radio now?’

‘Go for it,’ he said. I walked away from the plane and switched on the handheld radio. I called up the camp at Ai’io.

‘Where is the chopper?’ I asked. There was some shuffling and shouting on the other end. Eventually the party chief came on the line.

‘There’s a medical emergency on one of the cutting lines; some idiot put an aerosol can in the fire and it has blown up and injured a labourer.’

‘We need the chopper here,’ I said. Something sounded fishy, a medical emergency at exactly the same time the payroll was due to be picked up.

‘It will take about an hour and a half to get the labourer to the hospital at Moro,’ the party chief replied. ‘Can you hang on that long?’

‘Definitely not,’ I replied. ‘Are you sure it’s a genuine emergency?’

‘I dunno, I haven’t seen the labourer. The paramedic is up there now; he’ll let me know.’

‘Which line is it?’

‘Um, line Charlie I think.’

‘Isn’t that the line with all the Komos on it?’

‘Could be. What difference does that make?’

‘I’m not sure; just sounds too coincidental. We might drive the truck back with the cabbages on board.’ ‘Cabbages’ is a euphemism for money. It was politic not to talk about money and payrolls openly on the radio in the Southern Highlands. I was

beginning to feel uneasy. I walked back to the plane. The pilot was opening the nose locker on the Otter and pulling out the mail tin as I approached.

‘We’ve got some money for you here. Don’t forget it,’ he said loudly. I winced and looked at Peter. Bageley, the old Chimbu carpenter, grabbed the tin from the pilot and took it to the truck. Peter followed and locked it in the cab. We looked around. A group of villagers stood nearby. They had overheard everything. I walked over to Bageley and Peter.

‘What do you reckon?’ I asked. ‘The way I see it, if there are *raskols* from Komo about, they could hit us while we’re waiting on the strip for the chopper or try and ambush us on the road if we try to get away in the truck.’

‘We’re damned if we do and damned if we don’t,’ Peter said.

‘*Tingting bilong mi moa beta long rot,*’ Bageley said.

‘Okay, the road it is,’ I replied.

They hit us on a bend about two kilometres out of the village. A man stepped out of the jungle on the left-hand side of the track with a shotgun raised to his shoulder. Peter accelerated. There was absolutely no hesitation on the part of the gunman. He lined Peter up and fired. I saw the glass windscreen bubble and burst in front of Peter. He ducked but wasn’t quick enough. The shot burst through the rear of the cab and a splatter of blood slapped into my face.

Peter yelled and continued to accelerate around the bend in the track. The gunman jumped clear, trying to reload the single-barrelled shotgun as he went. I heard yells from the back of the truck and turned around. A group of men wielding bush

knives and axes had emerged onto the track and were gaining on the truck. As we swung round the bend we confronted a barrier of trees felled across the track. Peter accelerated again and we hit the middle of the barrier at full tilt. The truck spun to one side and slammed its tail into the bank. Peter was fighting to stay conscious. I grabbed the wheel and pulled us straight; he pushed his foot down again and we burst through the barrier.

There was so much blood coming from Peter's head that he couldn't see the road. I leaned over him and wiped the blood out of his eyes. He pulled the vehicle straight and we charged up the next hill. I slipped my shirt off and wrapped it around his head, tying it crudely in a tight knot. When I pulled my hand away two flattened shotgun pellets fell in my lap.

Between us we kept the truck going. I steered and he operated the accelerator. A couple of times I had to change gears. The next village, Hebai'ia, was not too far ahead. As we rounded a bend I noticed two people walking towards us. As we got closer I recognised them as the Australian Volunteers working at the school outside Waro. I leaned out of the window and waved at them.

'Get off the road! There are *raskols* with guns chasing us.' They obviously didn't hear me and simply waved in greeting and continued walking. I followed them in the rear-vision mirror and saw them turn off the main track onto a village track that would take them back to the school. 'Thank God for that,' I sighed.

We skidded into Hebai'ai and Peter slowed down and hit the brakes. I opened my door and ran around to help him out. He slumped in my arms and I half carried and half dragged him to the shade of a tree. Curious villagers were emerging from the nearby houses. I propped him against the trunk and checked his head.

Blood was seeping down his face and onto his chest. I slipped the makeshift bandage off, wrung the blood out and tied it back more securely. He groaned and said he felt cold. Bageley heard him and got a blanket from one of the newly arrived packs in the back of the truck. He wrapped it around Peter's shoulders.

I went to the truck and fished the hand-held radio from the bloody floor of the cab. I tried to call the camp but couldn't raise them. I swore and went back to check Peter. His pulse was racing and he had begun to tremble. I was worried that he was going into shock and wouldn't make it if we kept driving. I got back on the radio. This time I got an answer from one of the line-cutting crews. I explained the situation and they relayed the message to the main camp. Someone had gone to get the party chief. We played around with different frequencies while we waited and I managed to pick up the camp.

'The chopper is on the way,' the party chief said. 'The medical emergency was a false alarm; the labourer only had a small burn.' I was about to say something I might have regretted. Someone beside Peter was yelling in a loud voice and luckily distracted me. I turned and saw the village pastor. He had one hand on Peter's head and was waving his Bible in the other. He was reading Peter the last rites.

The chopper appeared overhead about twenty minutes later. We all waved. It cruised serenely past and disappeared.

'*Em bai I go long Waro,*' Bageley said.

'Stupid bastard,' I yelled in the direction it had gone and then remembered the radio. I called the chopper back. There was a clearing beside the road where I thought the chopper could safely put down and I ran to it waving a white towel from the back of the truck. The chopper reappeared and put down.

The paramedic emerged first, spotted Peter and headed for him. I shouted for the carpenters who had grabbed axes and bush knives from the villagers and were waiting down the track to take on the *raskols* if they turned up. Two security guards emerged from the chopper along with the camp mechanic.

We loaded Peter on board and the pilot motioned for me to jump on too. I shook my head and pointed to the truck. The pilot pushed a pair of earphones at me and I put them on. 'The party chief doesn't want any dead *kiaps*, even if they are old and grumpy. You're coming with me; the mechanic will drive the truck back. Throw the payroll in the back.'

'Okay,' I replied. 'We need to take Timothy the cook too; he's pretty upset and I don't want him having a heart attack.' The pilot nodded. Timothy looked grateful as we pulled into the sky.

I spent the next day nursing a bad case of sunburn. With my shirt wrapped around Peter's head I had been running around barechested in the midday sun. Peter made it to the hospital at Moro where the American doctor put twenty-seven stitches into his head. The shot from the gun had hit the stone shield in front of the windscreen first and then the glass. The steel pellets had been flattened into discs when they raked across Peter's head, and his wounds were mostly long gashes. We found nine flattened pellets on the floor of the cab when we cleaned up the blood.

'If the stupid bastard had hidden on the other side of the road he would have confronted the driver head on and blown his head off,' the inspector from the Mendi Mobile Police Squad said a few days later. His men were down at Waro village rounding up witnesses. He continued.

‘We know who the gunman is, he’s a nasty little Komo who we’ve been chasing for months. He’s travelling with a young girl. He must have set the diversion up with his mates on the line-cutting crew. We’ll nail them once we find out where he’s gone. The villagers reckon he’s taken off down the valley, following the river. He’s trying to get to Pimaga and back on the main road so he can make it back into the Highlands. I sent a car-load of men down there to wait for him. He conned the Waro villagers into helping him. It was their village shotgun that did the deed. The three blokes from Waro who helped him are also, um, helping us with our enquiries.’

The inspector was one tough cookie who I wouldn’t relish on my tail. The Mobile Police Squads in Papua New Guinea have a fearsome reputation. They are plunged into all sorts of hazardous situations. The Mendi squad probably has the toughest job in the whole country. Outside the main towns the Southern Highlands is virtually lawless and ruled by M16-toting clan war lords. They fund their activities by growing top-grade marijuana and shipping it via old jungle trade routes to the coast and by dinghy through the Torres Strait to Australia. The guns come back the other way. In the middle of all this a consortium of Australian and American oil companies are drilling oil and piping it down to the coast for loading onto Japanese freighters. The track alongside the pipeline is ideal for drug and gun-running.

The company I worked for is based in Mount Hagen, in the Western Highlands. It was set up by a couple of ex Patrol Officers (*kiaps*) and services the oil exploration industry, running their bush camps and providing expertise for dealing with landholders. Most of their European staff are *ex-kiaps* on short-term contracts. The work pays well when it is available.

The inspector went over to the hot water urn to make himself a coffee. We were in the mess, which was a bush timber structure covered with tarps and orange 'coffee' plastic. I heard a car pull up and a moment later the occupational health and safety officer from Moro walked through the door.

'How is the driver?' he asked. I was about to reply but he continued talking. 'I need to know all the details, especially about the work time lost while we round up another driver. It's a bloody good job the driver wasn't killed; that would have played merry hell with our safety record, not to mention our work-cover premiums.' I glanced at the inspector and he grinned back.

'Gotta get our priorities right,' he said.

'What's that supposed to mean?' the other man said. 'When will you catch this gunman, and what will happen to him? He'll just get a few months and be at it again. I imagine.'

The inspector smiled slowly. 'This one won't be going to court,' he replied. 'He's been too much trouble for too long. He'll probably resist arrest and try and fight my men, who will have no choice but to shoot him.'

'Good,' the other man said. He turned to me. 'Now let's get these details right. Have you prepared a statement? I'll need to check that.' He paused. 'Just to check the legalities, you understand.'

'Sure,' I said. 'Do we need to do it today? I'm flying out soon.'

'Let's get to it,' the man replied and pulled a sheaf of forms out of his bag.

The following week, after my replacement arrived, we drove back down to Waro to meet the plane. The Waro villagers were very

subdued. Peter was back in camp and he and the other men who had been on the truck were looking for compensation. We dropped the negotiating team off at the village and continued on to the airstrip. Although there were only camp rations on the plane, this time we had an armed police escort. Despite their presence the drive down was nerve-racking. When we were safely back at the camp I felt better. The inspector was waiting for me.

‘That *raskol* from Komo unfortunately drowned while trying to avoid arrest,’ he said. ‘The girl he was travelling with also seems to have disappeared.’

I shook my head. ‘Pity about her.’

‘Pity my arse!’ the inspector spat. ‘That little bitch killed two old ladies at Komo with a rock just to get their firewood money.’ I shook my head and the inspector continued. ‘I hear you’re leaving tomorrow. You’ll miss out on your compensation money. They reckon Peter will get over 20,000 kina. That will be a big chunk out of the Waro’s oil royalties.’

‘I don’t think I really want anything anyway,’ I replied.

The inspector shrugged. ‘Well, I can give you a lift into Moro this afternoon. You can spend the rest of today and tomorrow there and be all refreshed when the Moresby charter comes in on Friday.’

I took up his offer gladly. It was a long and lonely drive to Moro and I was still a bit shaky. I went off to tell the party chief I was on my way out.

We didn’t talk much as we bumped over the rough limestone track towards Moro. When we passed the first security gate and drove onto the graded road the ride became more comfortable

and the car quieter. We passed through the various processing plants attached to each well, and were soon on the downhill run to Lake Kutubu. The inspector eased back in his seat.

‘I hear you used to be a *kiap* in the colonial days.’

I winced. The word ‘colonial’ was usually a prelude to some sort of criticism. I answered slowly, ‘That’s right, I was here between 1967 and 1973, just before independence.’

‘The old people in the villages say they were good times, the days of the *kiap*.’

‘Sometimes they ask me why we left,’ I replied.

The inspector smiled briefly, looked at me for a few seconds and then said slowly ‘So what do you think has happened to my country?’

I was taken aback. I’d watched Papua New Guinea go downhill and wondered myself. I had a vague idea but I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell him. I think his country had been the victim of the times. The trendy sixties and seventies when colonialism was on the nose and countries like Australia were shedding their territories as quickly as possible whether the people were ready for it or not. I thought that’s what had happened, but who could be sure? It all seemed so complex. I decided to hedge.

‘I think this is just a phase you have to go through. It will eventually settle down and get better.’ I could see by his eyes that he knew I was trying to avoid the subject.

‘So what were those days like?’ he asked. ‘The days when the *kiaps* ruled?’

I sighed and leaned back in my seat. ‘How long have you got?’ I asked.

‘We’ve got all day tomorrow, I don’t have to be back in Mendi until the weekend. I’ll shout you a beer if you like.’

‘I thought this was a dry province.’

‘It is. We’ll be disposing of contraband.’

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘but I have to take it easy with the beer; it tends to knock my blood sugar levels around.’