



West Papuan asylum-seeker warming up before school in Melbourne with a gift from Amanda Vanstone, the Minister for Immigration who is now his legal mother (guardian). Photo: Louise Byrne, West Papua Embassy, May 2006.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW WE'VE GOT FORTY-THREE WEST PAPUANS?

On 17 January 2006, forty-three West Papuans beached their hand-hewn double-outrigger canoe *Exodus* on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula at Mapoon and requested asylum in Australia. They'd survived circumnavigating their homeland, and the Arafura Sea's bottleneck of dangerous currents and monsoons. They'd taken four days—not the eight hours they'd estimated—to reach Mapoon from Merauke. They'd almost drowned in violent storms, and didn't know whether they'd drifted into the western waters of Torres Strait. In 1841, an older journeyman, Captain Matthew Flinders recorded that 'Perhaps no space of three-and-a-half degrees in length presents more dangers than Torres' Strait.'

Their maritime odyssey began in 2005, in Jayapura, on the north coast of West Papua. They'd stopped at Sorong, the fading oil town on the west coast. Then Fak Fak—where the ancient cliffs are inscribed with towering aboriginal figures, and the people carrying the blood of old Muslim traders call themselves 'Papua Muslims'. On the Casuarina Coast they got lost around Frederik Hendrik Island (renamed 'Yos Sudarso' after the Indonesian Navy commander who went down with his ship trying to invade West Papua). Their penultimate stop was Merauke in the south-east corner of the 'Unitary Republic of Indonesia'.

During World War Two Merauke was a defence base against Japanese attacks on northern Australia. John Collins from Sydney, then 18 years old, remembers it as a small village of 500 people. He'd gone there on the Dutch ship *Vanderlin*, with the rest of the 52nd Composite Anti-Aircraft, and joined 6,000 Dutch, US and Australian army navy and airforce personnel. American General Douglas MacArthur transformed the swampy village into a huge military base, with radar station, anti-aircraft posts, and a new wharf. In 1944 Australian and American aircraft bombers from the Merauke base flattened Hollandia (now Jayapura). A future prime minister, Flight Lieutenant Gough Whitlam was a navigator in those operations.

At 3am, on Friday 13 January 2006, the forty-three West Papuans, their kids on their shoulders, hurried over Merauke's muddy tidal flats to the fragile ark their fathers had made for them. They had some biscuits, milk, and a few water bottles. They'd estimated they'd reach the Australian mainland in eight hours, but four days later they hadn't arrived.

Late Sunday night, Captain Mal from National Search and Rescue in Canberra, telephone Jacob Rumbiak, a West Papuan independence leader in Melbourne. Neither man knew the Papuans had already beached on Cape York Peninsula. Jacob told Captain Mal that in determining their direction, the travellers would have called Merauke 'zero' and pointed the 'face' of their canoe to the 'neck' of Australia at an angle of sixty degrees. The tribal navigation tradition didn't light many buttons on the captain's million-dollar technology,



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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MERAUKE, DUTCH NEW GUINEA, 11 APRIL 1944. Gunner Lloyd Moore of Dubbo with a small Timor pony foal he has just retrieved from tall swamp grass

but he told Jacob he would use the information in plotting the government's search-and-rescue course.

Damien Baker from Torres News was the first to photograph the asylum seekers languishing under a tree alongside their canoe. He immediately globalised the image on the internet, forcing Australia's Department of Immigration to uphold the Refugee Convention and grant the political dissidents asylum. Nevertheless, while the Papuans were isolated on Christmas Island, refugee-support groups around Australia, long used to losing their battles with the government, maintained a keen vigil over the progress of their legal claims.

Customs didn't publicize its burning of the West Papuans canoe, which landed its precious cargo after an odyssey of 4000 kms through some of the most treacherous waters in the world. The life of the canoe had began decades earlier as a special seed, which was prayed over and nurtured to maturity, then with few tools cut down, and honed and crafted to ancient design. Many believed it merited the attention of maritime scholars and space in a maritime museum more than a secret incineration by furtive bureaucrats.



MAPOON, FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND, TUES 17 JANUARY 2006. The asylum seekers languishing under a tree after beaching their traditional canoe. The government helicopter encircling the scene is enforcing the 32 km 'no fly zone' established as soon as Captain Mal's Search-and-Rescue Team spotted them. Photo: Damien Baker, Torres News.

On 3 April 2006, twelve weeks after they landed at Mapoon, forty-two of the asylum seekers were flown to Melbourne with three-year Temporary Protection Visas. No 43, David Wainggai, was detained on Christmas Island for a further three months while Immigration bureaucrats investigated whether he could be sent to Japan. (His mother, Teruka, was born in Japan, but became an Indonesian citizen when she married David's father in 1969). However, as soon as David Manne, the asylum seekers' government-appointed lawyer, approached the Federal Magistrates Court for a ruling, the bureaucrats quickly acknowledged No. 43's Papuan heritage and afforded him the same status as his 42 friends and relatives.

David is the son of Dr Tom Wainggai, West Papua's most influential intellectual who founded the non-violent indigenous-Melanesian movement for

independence in the mid-1980s. He and his brother and sister were 'adopted' by the notorious Indonesian Intelligence Commander General Benny Murdani after most of their family were arrested for raising the 'West Melanesia' flag in 1988. Their mother Teruka was sentenced to eight years in prison—although quietly released a few years later after pressure from one of President Suharto's wealthy Japanese business associates. Their aunts Paulina Wainggai and Henni Awom were incarcerated for five years. Their father was



KILBREDA CATHOLIC GIRLS COLLEGE, MELBOURNE, JUNE 2016. Jefry and Eli Jikwa, two of the young West Papuan 'boat people' sharing stories about their homeland.

given a life sentence, but was poisoned in Cipinang Prison in 1996 during the international hostage crisis in the highlands.

So what can the asylum seekers, these Melanesian brothers and sisters of New Guinea's 'fuzzy wuzzy angels' expect of Australians now?

Australia betrayed the West Papuans right of self-determination in 1962. Garfield Barwick (Minister for External Affairs and Australian representative at the United Nations) convinced the Menzies government to change the long-standing practice of aligning Australia's Trust obligations with the Netherlands self-determination program on the other side of the border.

So Australia lined up behind the Kennedy Administration's Cold War inspired 'New York Agreement' by which the Dutch were kicked out of the Melanesian colony and an Indonesian administration was inserted. A ballot in 1969 (six years after the takeover) saw 1,025 West Papuans selected by the Indonesian military voting on behalf of the population 'to remain with Indonesia' or 'sever ties with Indonesia'! They'd been isolated and indoctrinated for six weeks before 'voting' in eight different locations over a period of nineteen days! Extraordinarily, eighty-four UN member states, including Australia, accepted Indonesia's and the UN Secretary-General's reports on this 'Act of Free Choice' and a nation of indigenous Melanesians became Asian Indonesians on 19 November 1969. (Kim Beasley snr objected to Menzies government machinations in PNG that stopped two West Papuan leaders from flying to New York to appeal the decision).

The Australian people, as distinct from their successive governments, are not still bogged in the political machinations of the 1960s. The forty-three West Papuans, and the shenanigans in the wake of their recognition as asylum seekers, strengthened support for their freedom. Churches, trade unions, non-government organizations, private schools, old soldiers, mums and dads, university students, film-makers, authors and artists, nuns and priests, and pastors and clerics are now all talking about their independence.

The case of Mickey, a young West Papuan pilot, is illustrative. The Me tribe in the highlands worked hard to fund his private licence in Jakarta. Then the Missionary Aviation Fellowship in West Papua sent him to Australia for bible studies and his commercial pilot's licence. All was going well until a fellow student built a website for him which included West Papua's Morning Star flag. MAF immediately cut his scholarship, rejected his apologies, and Mickey's dream to fly appeared to have vapourized. Then Mr Costello (Tim and Peter's father who had been shot down in New Guinea during World War 2 and saved from the Japanese by Numfoor islanders) heard about the situation and paid for the rest of his flying tuition. Within months Mickey had graduated and is now back home flying commercial aircraft.

Australians need to more readily identify as a Pacific nation with social and political responsibilities in the region. Through the Papuans, our northern neighbour, we can learn about the Indonesia they know better than anyone else—for instance what Jakarta conceals behind its democratic façade, and the cells of terrorism it has been developing in Papuan towns and villages. We might even learn to listen to Papuan intelligence rather than—or as well as—the Indonesian military and police and their government megaphone.

*Louise Byrne
September 2006*