

The Stowaway: From Sorong to Rotterdam

A Memoir by Eddy Korwa

This book was published in Dutch in 2020 as *De verstekeling—van Sorong naar Rotterdam* with a welcome translation into English in 2025. Though the writing is pedestrian Korwa has a gripping personal story to tell.

It is also important because of his insights into two neglected areas of writing on West Papua. The 1950s, as the Dutch Government began to prepare the West Papuan people for independence, was a time of excitement, hope, and change. And the life lived by West Papuan exiles in the Netherlands, which is little known in Australia. Sadly, it appears from Eddy's account, to be not much better known in the Netherlands itself.

He was born in 1940 on the island of Awai just off the larger island of Biak which saw fierce fighting during WW2. Biak with its honeycomb of underground caves was the last hold-out of the Japanese until their surrender and their commanding officer Lt. Col. Kuzume Naoyuki's suicide in 1944. During the war more than 150,000 Americans, at least 38,000 Japanese and more than 12,000 Australians were in the Dutch half of New Guinea. Yet this campaign is almost unknown in Australia. As well, the Dutch set up and trained several battalions of West Papuans and also used West Papuans as very effective intelligence-gatherers. A semi-naked Papuan could walk on to a Japanese base and be ignored as he obviously wasn't carrying any weapons. Then sharp eyes and good memories could bring back vital information on Japanese numbers, weapons, layout and preparedness.

Korwa started school when he was nine at a village school then went to the General Elementary School in Biak (where he acquired a penpal in the Netherlands) then he went to the Lower Technical School in Hollandia (now called Jayapura) and became a carpenter, first working on the Central Hospital there. This was an exciting but poorly documented time in West Papua's history. It saw the creation of the New-Guinea Council, the building of new schools, the setting up of a national radio broadcaster and the development of overseas communications, as well as civic and military training and the development of political parties. It was on the radio that Korwa heard of the opportunity to train as a seaman and gain experience as a pilot, bringing ships into port.

In April 1961 the Netherlands formally wished the New-Guinea Council and the West Papuans well in their journey towards independence. "The world was able to witness the Papuans on their way to self-governance as there were foreign media and delegations present. We didn't know that the American President Kennedy had declined the invitation. He probably didn't want to offend Soekarno, but it was a sign even then that Papuans could expect little support from the United States."

A national flag, the Morning Star, was designed, a national emblem, the mambruk or crowned pigeon, was chosen, and a national anthem devised.

But Indonesia continued to ramp up its claim to ownership of the Melanesian territory and began its farcical military attempt to invade. The Dutch mobilised their maritime fleet and set up anti-aircraft batteries along the coasts. If the world had left the Dutch and the Indonesians to 'fight it out' the Indonesians would have faced an ignominious defeat and the West Papuans would have continued their march towards self-government and independence. But the USA had other ideas.

The Kennedy administration wanted to curry favour with the left-leaning Soekarno government in Jakarta. The US was already well aware of West Papua's mineral wealth and the fact that the Indonesians, unlike the Dutch, did not have the expertise to extract that wealth and would therefore look to American expertise. But Korwa mentions a third factor "we knew nothing about at the time: the role played by Queen Juliana's husband Prince Bernhard. In 1962 the Dutch cabinet was still weighing the pros and cons for the defence and further development of New Guinea, not realizing that the prince, in 1961, had independently held discussions with President Kennedy to secure business interests in the new Indonesia. The more I read, the clearer it became that Bernhard simply sold us Papuans. ... He abandoned the Papuans, and also those young Dutch soldiers the government sent out to work with us. Their mission was suddenly aborted, and when they returned they were ridiculed. The government sent each of them a New Guinea Commemorative Cross in the mail, which some of them returned. There is not a word about the former Dutch New Guinea in Dutch school books, and I know that many of the veterans still feel the pain of abandoning the Papuans."

The New York Agreement required the Dutch to move out and a temporary UN administration (UNTEA) to move in, backed by Pakistani troops. "The Pakistani troops were meant to protect the population, but I didn't trust them. I heard stories about their passive stance when the Indonesian soldiers misbehaved, and I personally witnessed them just watching Indonesian soldiers beating peaceful Papuans. I soon realized that we could not expect anything from the UN."

On the 1st May 1963 the UN moved out and Indonesia began to show just how much they held the West Papuans in contempt, burning passports, beating West Papuans who wore Dutch-style clothes (and those who disdained clothes in the highlands and refused to give up wearing their penis gourds) and killing village pigs. "Political tension and arbitrary reprisals by Kopassus, the military's special military force, meant this was a terrible time for resistance groups and ordinary people. The Kopassus guys were mean and tough; real killing squads. They are still in Papua and the Moluccas, and wreaked havoc in East Timor during its occupation of twenty-four years."

Korwa decided to try and leave West Papua. With his friend Tony Rumpaisum he stowed away on the MS Schelde Lloyd, the last Dutch ship to leave the port of Sorong. They survived the Indonesian use of gas to flush out possible stowaways and three days without food or water cramped under an oil tank. When they made their appearance, driven by hunger, the captain threatened to put them ashore on the south coast of West Papua. But they had some unexpected luck. The crew refused to put them ashore and, by an amazing coincidence Eddy's penpal was on board. They spent

a week in prison in Australia but the prison director “confirmed that we were under the protection of Dutch law” and they were allowed back on board. After a long journey via China, Borneo (where Soekarno’s ‘Crush Malaysia’ military campaign was being beaten back by the British), Bangkok, Singapore, Sumatra, Aden, Beirut, then across the Mediterranean and around to Germany and on 8th August 1964 they sailed into the port of Rotterdam.

It wasn’t the beginning of a wonderful new life. There were many problems in finding accommodation and work, and learning how to be an activist in a country where there was little interest in the plight of the West Papuan people. It did however bring him new friends, a happy marriage, and a family of eight children of his own.

Though individual Dutch people were often kind and supportive the same can not be said for the Dutch Government and various Dutch institutions. Holland supinely accepted President Kennedy’s push to transfer Dutch New Guinea to Indonesia regardless of the views and wishes and aspirations of its Melanesian people. The Dutch media referred to Indonesia’s killing of a thousand people at Manokwari in 1965 as an ‘incident’. The Dutch removed the scholarships of Papuans studying there at the time of the handover saying they were now ‘Indonesian subjects’ and it took community pressure to get this support reinstated. The Dutch then completely betrayed the West Papuan people by voting in the U.N. in 1969 that the farcical ‘Act of Free Choice’ ostensibly under the U.N.’s auspices but in reality the Indonesian army’s rounding up of 1,025 men and 1 woman, was in fact free and fair. The 15 nations which asked that the plebiscite results be set aside and a proper vote carried out in 1974 were all African nations. The Netherlands should have had the integrity to take leadership of this principled position. They knew better than most nations that Indonesian colonialism was duplicitous and violent.

In May 1969 Korwa was part of the freedom march as part of the National Torch of Melanesian Ideology to The Hague, carrying his banner to say ‘Minister Luns, don’t play the role of Judas’. “After all, the Netherlands had initiated the development towards independence in New Guinea, but at the crucial moment turned its back on the Papuans. Any politician could see that the Papuans had nowhere to go, nowhere to turn, while the Netherlands deliberately looked the other way. The Netherlands betrayed the Papuans for a few pennies, for trade relations with Indonesia.”

This is something he returns to. “And what does the Dutch government do for the former Dutch New Guinea? It sells ships and military equipment to the Indonesian army and navy. It doesn’t write about Papua in the history books. Not many young Dutch people now know where Papua is. There are few support groups, whereas in other countries the number of support groups for West Papua is growing.”

He also includes a photo of the ‘West Irian Liberation Monument’ in Jakarta, of a man breaking the chains that bind his arms which is supposed to be a monument to the triumph of the Indonesian army over the Dutch but in reality is a constant reminder to the West Papuan people that they are the ultimate victims of the Indonesian military and international ‘diplomacy’. That both Sukarno and Suharto collaborated with the Japanese (Sukarno sending thousands of poor Indonesians to die on the Burma

Railway) raises the intriguing and ironic point: if it had been left to them West Papua would have become a Japanese colony. It was the courage and determination of the Allies, the Dutch and the West Papuans which removed the Japanese and paved the way for Indonesia's massive land grab.

Along with his political activism, and there were at times disagreements and factions as well as issues with working with the South Moluccan community, he could see the need to pass on Papuan culture, music, song, sport, skills and social support and networking to the younger generations. And to find ways to share their culture and history with a country where West Papua was rarely mentioned. In 1985 he had the chance to visit Geneva to attend the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations. This is an area the UN has always fumbled over. It might say 'We the peoples' but it really means 'We the nations'. People without nationhood struggle to be heard.

He then had a chance to visit Vanuatu which has never wavered in its support of West Papua. In 1990 he visited family in West Papua and when he went back for a conference in 2000 the sense of surveillance had lessened slightly with the ousting of Suharto. But the slight easing under President Wahid did not last. "On 23 July 2001, President Wahid was succeeded by Megawati Soekarnoputri, Sukarno's daughter. Three months later, special autonomy was imposed on the Papuans. The Congress in 2000 with all the Morning Star flags had all seemed too good to be true. Three months into Soekarnoputri's presidency, Theys Eluay, chairman of the Papua Presidium, was murdered. Everything was back to square one. In January 2003 Jakarta unilaterally partitioned Papua into two provinces: Papua Barat and Papua. What is special autonomy if Jakarta alone could make such decisions? What was the point if the profit of the Grasberg mine still flowed directly to Jakarta, leaving only environmental damage for the Papuans? What does autonomy mean as long as Papuans have no say?"

He ends his account: 'I fear for my people. My country will never again become the pristine land that I left in 1964. The water polluted by gold mining cannot cleanse itself. Vast areas of rain-forest have been cleared for palm oil plantations. The bird of paradise faces extinction. But as long as voices calling for justice are heard in the cities and the interior, as long as international attention is growing, and as long as the Morning Star still rises, there is still hope for a better future for the generations to come. May this future be one of freedom.'

Eddy Korwa died on 22 October 2024. But his book and his call for international solidarity with the West Papuan people will live on.

Jennie Herrera

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