



BOUGAINVILLE
PEACEKEEPING IN THE PACIFIC

Bougainville

Background

Bougainville is a collection of islands in the Solomon Island archipelago, in Melanesia in the Pacific. The main island is called Bougainville and close to the north is the smaller island of Buka which has the airstrip. These two islands are linked by a regular ferry service. The climate is tropical.

The population of approximately 300,000 is now mainly Christian and is made up of many different clans. It is a linguistically complex island, with over 19 language groups and further dialects. Traditionally the people operate as an egalitarian and matrilineal society with land being passed down from mother to eldest daughter. Land is considered their lifeline and living in harmony with nature is important to them.

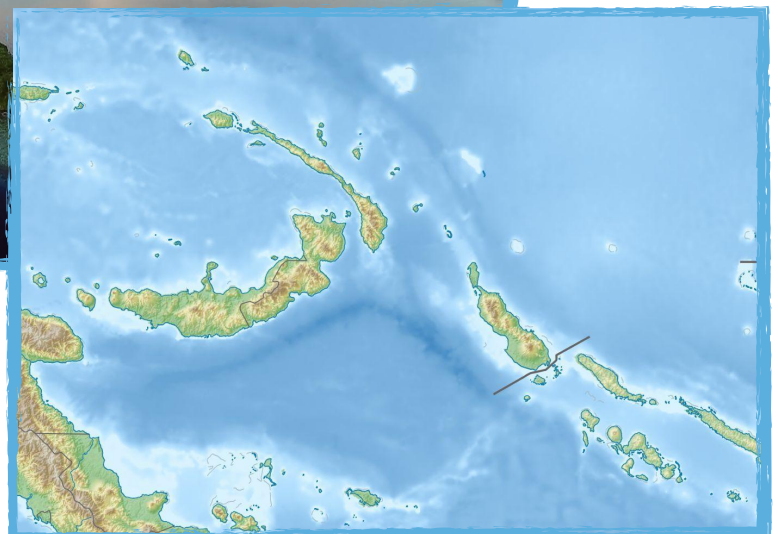
Settlement

These islands were first settled around eight thousand years ago by Melanesians followed by Austronesian peoples three to four thousand years ago. In 1768 the French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville was the first European to make contact and named the island after himself.

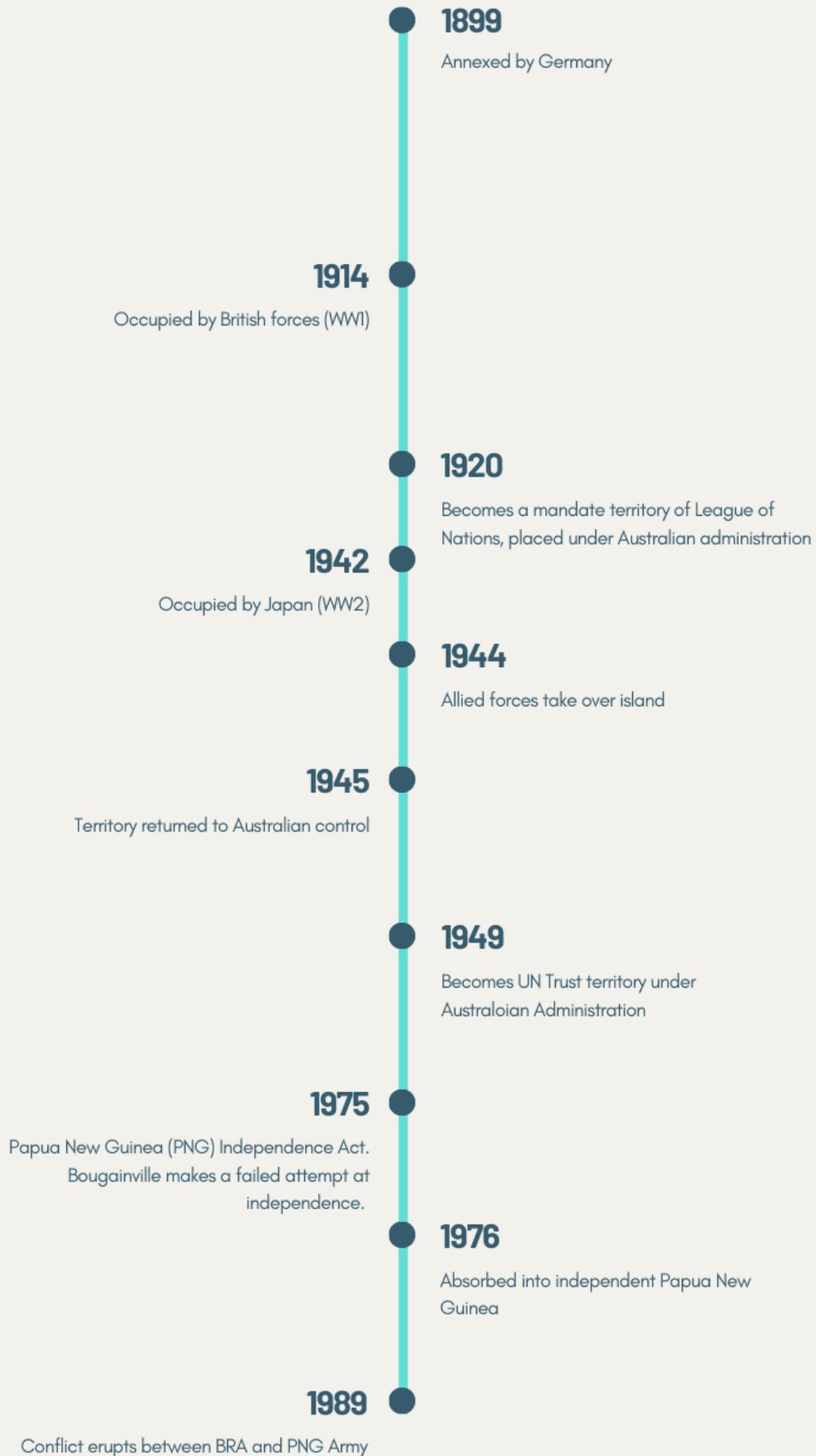
In the late 1800s, during the age of Pacific colonization by Europe, New Guinea was carved up between the Dutch, British and German powers. Bougainville was included within the New Guinea spectrum. The islanders of Bougainville never felt they were a part of New Guinea. They were culturally, linguistically, and geographically closer to the Solomon Islands.



Photo credit: Will Watson, Director of Soldiers Without Guns



A BRIEF HISTORY OF BOUGAINVILLE



Panguna Copper Mine

In the 1960's large copper deposits were discovered in an area on Bougainville called Panguna. Becoming the world's largest open cut mine, it was opened and operated by Conzinc Rio-Tinto Australia.

From the beginning locals were opposed to the mine. Compensation was poor and the company registered various landowners but excluded women.

The environmental destruction wrought by the mine was devastating as it produced 60,000 tonnes of waste per day. The mining operation damaged the forests, polluted the river and the heavy metals contaminated the earth.

Papua New Guinea was registered as a 20% shareholder and the copper amounted to almost half of their export revenue.

Conflict

In 1988 the Bougainville people rebelled against the damage to their ecology and began sabotage attacks at the mine. These attacks were led by Francis Ona. He formed the Bougainville Revolutionary Army and many of his fighters were armed with weapons left behind by the Japanese in WW2.

In 1989 their actions led to the forced closure of the mine.

The forced closure of the mine was unacceptable to Papua New Guinea who responded by sending in their army. Many civilians were murdered which made negotiations impossible. There was a total of 14 failed peace negotiation attempts.



Photo credit: Will Watson, Director of Soldiers Without Guns

Papua New Guinea left the island in 1990, taking all their public services with them and implementing a blockade. Many from Bougainville died from starvation and preventable diseases. This turned the conflict inwards, and factions emerged, some turning against the Bougainville Revolutionary Army.

A new group was formed - The Resistance. They requested Papua New Guinea return. The opportunity to divide and conquer was seized.

In 1997 the government of Papua New Guinea engaged Sandline Ltd, a private mercenary agency, to fight alongside PNG Forces to end the conflict. This decision was condemned by the Australian government and the commander of the PNG Defence Force. He subsequently disarmed and arrested the mercenaries and called on the Prime Minister to resign.

By now the war had claimed the lives of over 15,000. The women of Bougainville were calling for peace. A new strategy was needed - this is when New Zealand became involved.

NZ Peacekeeping

New Zealand was seen as neutral. The people of Bougainville were very mistrustful of the Australians who owned the mine and had supported PNG during the conflict. Don MacKinnon (NZ Minister of Foreign Affairs) assessed the situation and sent the diplomat John Hayes to Bougainville to request that leaders in Bougainville come to New Zealand for peace talks. This was a dangerous operation. His helicopter was shot down when entering the air space above the Panguna mine. Hayes did not report he had been shot down, instead citing the incident as a mechanical failure. It could have ended the peace initiative if being shot down was heard of by the New Zealand government.

Eventually, all fifty of the delegates (women included) safely arrived in NZ. They were welcomed on to Burnham military camp by powhiri, shared hongi and viewed haka performances. The culture spoke to them. Less than twenty-four hours ago, many of these people had been fighting each other in the conflict. They now sat here next to each other. The Burnham declaration was signed. It called for reconciliation and unity, declaration of ceasefire, a neutral peace keeping force, and the demilitarisation of Bougainville. The importance of these peace talks can not be overstated.

Brigadier Roger Mortlock was placed in command of the Truce Monitoring Group (TMG) and their mission, dubbed Operation Bel-isi (meaning at ease in Pidgin).

“The Maori concert group and a good shipment of guitars are going to be the main weapons in our arsenal”

Brigadier Roger Mortlock

This was the first time NZ had led a mission and nerves were high as Francis Ona was not in agreement with New Zealand being involved. There were still armed men in the bush. The NZDF arrived in Buka in July 1997 on a Hercules C130. The airfield of Aropa airport, which had been destroyed and booby trapped, had only just been repaired sufficiently for the airplane's arrival.



Photo credit: Will Watson, Director of Soldiers Without Guns

The NZ'ers set up camp. Some from Bougainville were suspicious of the New Zealander's motives but soon the Kiwis started to put them at ease. The local people were impressed that the culture brought to the island was not 'western'. The unarmed soldiers put on performances as they traveled from village to village, meeting the locals. Disappointment was expressed if a haka was not performed!

As their fears were dispelled the weapons began to be less evident. Women played a huge role. The women of Bougainville wanted to speak with women. In 1998 control was handed to Lieutenant General Jerry Mateparae with a peace agreement deadline looming.



Photo credit: Will Watson, Director of Soldiers Without Guns

Tensions began to rise again when it was announced control would be handed to Australia after the peace accord was signed, however most wanted the Burnham Declaration implemented. In April of 1998 the terms were finally agreed upon. Celebrations broke out across the island.

Bougainville has remained at peace for over 20 years which makes this modern history's most successful peacekeeping mission.

In 2005 Bougainville was made autonomous and in 2019 over 97% voted in favour of independence on a promised referendum. The mine remains closed.

Interview With a Soldier: Staff Sergeant Wayne Lind

Wayne joined the NZDF in 1985 originally as infantry and then served two and a half years in Singapore with 1 RNZIR before returning to New Zealand and joining The New Zealand Intelligence Corps (NZIC). He played a key role in the Bougainville peace talks here in New Zealand and was then deployed to the island during the peace keeping mission. Here's what he has to say.

What was your role there on Bougainville?

Intelligence. I was in the Tonu team site in the Siwai province in the southwest side of the island. I was the intelligence person for that team site. I was there for about 4 months and then moved to Arawa to set up counterintelligence for the Australians prior to them taking over.



Sergeant Wayne Lind and Lt Col Rob Hoult on a Matilda tank (used during WWII) whilst out on patrol in Bougainville

Were you nervous without your usual arsenal?

There were certainly a lot of people on the ground that were like “shoot, this isn’t necessarily going to be a good thing”. Being unarmed was not something we were used to. Whilst the main Bougainvillian leadership consented to NZDF deploying it was unknown what the reaction on the ground would be.

I was involved with Burnham 1 and 2 peace talks and the Lincoln Agreement and knew most of the leadership of the differing factions prior to deploying.

What was the most important aspect of the peace talks?

For the NZ Army the most important part of the talks was that the delegations got to know NZ Army personnel and that we were perceived as letting them conduct their talks without influencing them.

Each night if the talks were successful, the various factions would be hosted in the Burnham Corporals Club which had been closed for Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the duration of the talks. For the NZ Army personnel that attended they came to understand the issues on Bougainville and personal relationships developed. The Bougainvillians got to know us as people rather than just a foreign military force. I think the way that the peace talks worked in New Zealand, prior to going over is what made it all possible. Having the trust of all the different factions. For NZers to even go there, that's what made it possible, without that it may have not worked.

A number of Bougainvillians had expressed they thought the Australians and Papua New Guineans were racist towards them which had made previous negotiations difficult. They believed New Zealanders treated everyone equally which made a huge difference.

How did it feel to be a part of such a unique mission? One led by NZ for the first time?

Good. I think we were quite fortunate because we were involved in the peace talks and we knew a lot about where we were going to, who the key players were and what the issues were in each region. We had a lot better insight because of the peace talks. The fact that the majority of leaders except for Francis Ona attended the talks meant that most provinces and areas of Bougainville had agreed to a truce and peace and the NZ deployment to the island. The Panguna Mine controlled by Francis Ona remained a no go area for the NZ led patrols.

The mine was the catalyst, what else do you think antagonised this conflict?

I think the ethnic differences and everything else. The fact that Papua New Guinea weren't seen to be caring at all of the Bougainvilleans, they treated them as second class citizens. Not only the mine but they saw both Australia through Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) and Papua New Guinea as making huge money off of their island but they were receiving very little from it, pollution from the mine was ruining their villages, their lifestyle, the rivers and the food chain.

Were there soldiers from Australia on the island at the time? Were they armed? How were they viewed/treated by the locals?

There were Aussie civilians when I first went over, some from foreign affairs and federal police, they were in our team sites and came out on patrol with us. Whilst I was there it transitioned to Australian leadership. Prior to the transition lots of Bougainvillians expressed distrust of Australians taking over, they believed Australia would again side with Papua New Guinea and they wanted to reopen the mines. When the Aussies first came in the way they operated was more authoritarian, they treated Bougainvilleans differently and there was more distrust.. When the Aussies would pull out their GPS to navigate, some Bougainvilleans believed they were gold mining sensors and that they were there to explore for more mines. A number of Bougainvillian leaders believed Australia had provided Papua New Guinea with helicopters and other military support which was then used by the PNGDF against the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA).

What was the most memorable part of your deployment?

In my area, in the Siwai province we had all the Bougainvillian factions turn up at our team site to hand their weapons in, this was a great indication that the various factions in our province had put their differences aside. This was a locally arranged thing and we got told to hand them back as they would be handed in during a formal hand-back when the UN takes over.



BRA Weapons handed into the Tonu teamsite "March 98" (some 3 years before the official weapons hand in)

Feelings when leaving?

I loved the Bougainvillean people. They were really caring and considerate people and very clever. They were making ammunition from some of the old Japanese munitions, they were generating limited electricity in some streams, they were making vehicle fuel out of coconut oil, and had made tanks out of bulldozers. It was amazing what they had done and how they managed to fight effectively against the well armed PNG Army.

Additional resources

Watch

[Bougainville Origins Clip](#)

Watson W. (2019) *Soldiers Without Guns*. TMI Production Company.
[Soldiers Without Guns: Home](#)

Read

[A risky assignment - Bougainville](#)

[Bougainville hoping to swap a troubled past for future peace](#)

[Bougainville president details necessary steps to independence](#)

[Bougainville independence is biggest issue facing PNG - PM](#)

Resources

Bougainville Island (N.D)

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Bougainville-Island>

A risky assignment (N.D)

<https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/about-us/mfat75/bougainville-a-risky-assignment/>

Soldiers Without Guns: how peace in Bougainville was helped by waiata and haka (2019, April 2)

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/nat-music/audio/2018689153/soldiers-without-guns-how-peace-in-bougainville-was-helped-by-waiata-and-haka>

Bougainville: Island of Scars (N.D)

<https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/bougainville-island-of-scars/>

William Watson (Producer) *Soldiers Without Guns*, TMI Pictures, Auckland, New Zealand