

Topophilia

Boundary definition in New Guinea in the 1960s was quite a challenge to a newly-registered young surveyor from NSW, as I was then. On one occasion, what looked like being an almost impossible task turned out to be surprisingly simple, due to some expert local advice.

I'd arrived in New Guinea with all the cultural baggage of a 1950s education, complete with "Boys Own"-type stories about how the intrepid white man mystifies the natives with the magic of his technology. The very last thing I expected was to find myself mystified by the magic of one little old native man.

My current job was to survey several government and mission stations in the Aitape District on the north-west coast, from Tadjì to the east of Aitape to Sissano to the west. I started at Tadjì, flying in with a bunch of aviation enthusiast tourists and my native chainmen on a DC3; the good old gooney-bird, still my favourite aircraft.



On Tadjì Airstrip

This was an adventure in itself. Tadjì had been a major base in World War II. The object of the tourists' interest, a number of American bombers and fighters with their huge radial engines, still stood mouldering away in the jungle and coconut palms where they'd been abandoned at the end of the war (weep, you vintage plane buffs).

The first allotment I had to survey was right beside the airport, a piece of ground that the Lutheran Mission had bought from the locals in 1908, in German colonial times. All I had to go on was a drawing from the Colonial Ground Book, an archive that had

somehow survived the bombing of Berlin. This showed nothing but a parallelogram, 100 and 200 metres to a side, the angle by which it differed from 90 degrees, and a distance of about 150 metres to Pro Village.

The village still existed, but not necessarily in the same place. It had been rebuilt after the war, and probably more than once in the almost 60 years since 1908. With little hope, I went to ask if anyone might have some idea of where this land could be. A *lapun* (old man) spoke up, with such enthusiasm that it looked as if he'd been waiting for someone like me to come along for all those years.

"Oyes, mi got savvy long 'em! Mi stop pikinini yet long gut-time!" (He had been a child when the Germans were there: the "good-time". As conventional wisdom had it that the Germans used to whup the locals like good ol' boys did the slaves in the Alabama cottonfields, I always thought this term a wonderful piece of black humour — no pun intended).

He took up his walking stick, and offered to show me. Having nothing better to do, I followed him.

My scepticism was due to the history of this area since 1908. The Germans had cleared the original jungle from the sandy coastal plain to create a coconut plantation. The Australians kicked the Germans out and took over, under a League of Nations mandate, following World War I. In World War II the Japanese cleared it again for an airbase. The Americans bombed it to bits, then bulldozed the lot to make a bigger and better airbase. Twenty-one years later the airstrip was still there, some tarmac, the rest made of the steel Marsden matting that seemed to practically hold the whole country together, but the jungle had reclaimed the dispersal areas.

Not only the vegetation, but the whole shape of the land had changed many times on my supposed site, and for a vast area around it.

Now a white man, I think, would have tried to walk the boundaries. The *lapun* led me along a winding track, stopped, seemed to sniff the air, and pointed with his chin in the native fashion: *"Em nau!"*

He directed the young men to clear a path for him through the jungle. It wasn't straight, but that didn't seem to bother him. He stopped at a piece of jungle apparently no different from the rest and pointed to the ground.

"Em 'e stop," he said with satisfaction, and held a stake on the point while we banged it in.

Returning to the track we wandered along it for a bit, then repeated the process. He then led us on about half a kilometre to the clearing around the coconut plantation, down to the beach, and back towards the village. Twice along the way he veered off back into the jungle to place the other two stakes.

I thanked the *lapun* and paid him for his trouble. At least, I thought, he seemed to be a respected elder, so the other locals shouldn't object to his definition, no matter how much it varied from the paper dimensions.

We spent the rest of the day, in those pre-Electronic Distance Meter times, in making a compass-and-tape traverse of the track and offshoots to the stakes. I calculated the sides that night, and they seemed strangely close to what they were supposed to be.

Over the next couple of days, we cleared the boundaries and made the survey: and what do you think I found? The maximum variation between the *lapun*'s stakes and the distances and angle in the Colonial Ground Book of 1908 was less than one metre! I kid you not.

The other surveys, west of Aitape, were much more difficult; I had no *lapun* to aid me, and had to sort out the errors of patrol officers' preliminary (and inexperienced) compass-and-tape surveys. (This was in the area devastated by the 1998 tidal wave, but that's another story).

Just a few years ago I came across the word TOPOPHILIA, and immediately thought of the old man of Pro, certainly long dead by then.

You won't find the word in any but the largest dictionaries, but it's a beautiful word, and one all surveyors should empathise with. It means a love of place, or landscape; more, it means a mystical union with the landscape which can only be gained by a lifetime of appreciation and interaction.

But I hadn't heard the word at that stage of my life in 1966, so I called what I'd witnessed something else.

Magic.

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