

EPW-25  
The B.S.I.P.: Prologue

c/- Post Office,  
Honiara,  
British Solomon  
Islands Protectorate

June 30, 1970

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
Executive Director,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
535 Fifth Avenue,  
New York, New York 10017,  
United States of America

Dear Mr. Nolte,

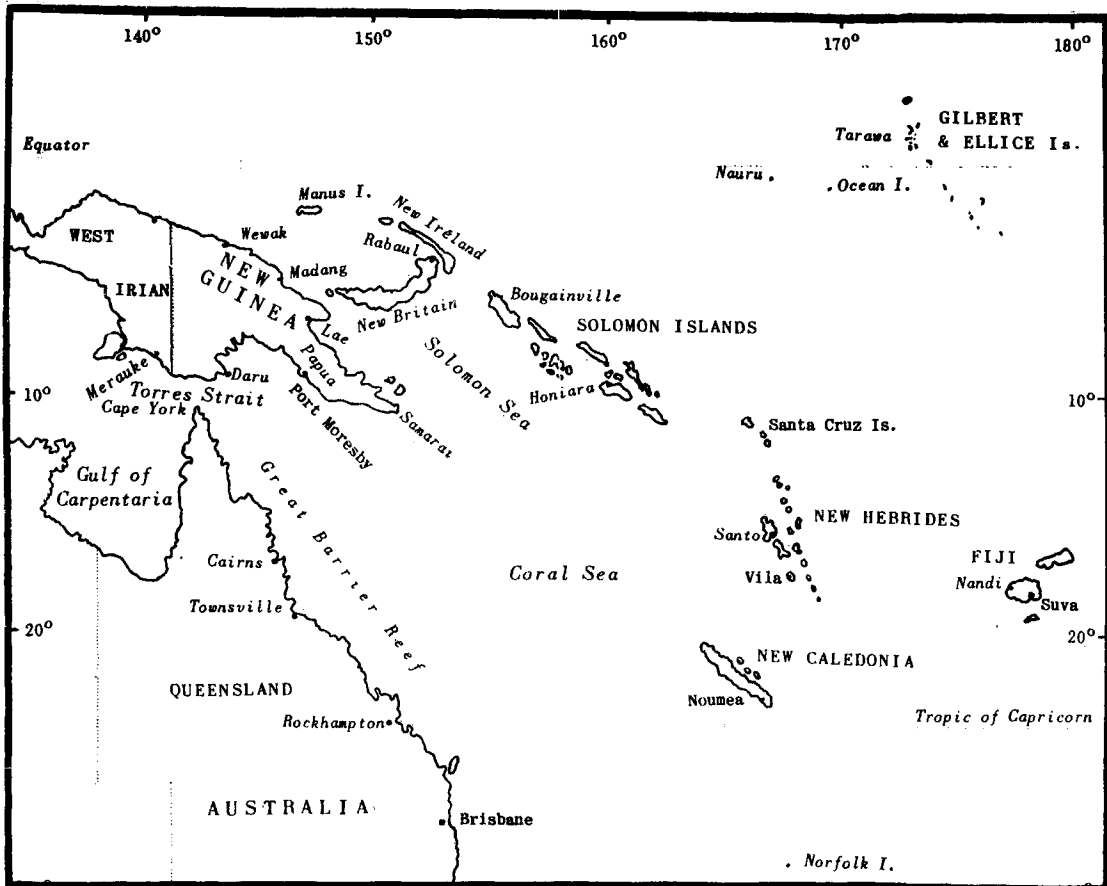
Although not a fully-fledged (or should the conceit be "turbo-propped"?) member of the international academic or journalistic jet-sets, the attractions of which are rendered irrelevant by the leisurely peregrinations allowed of Fellows of this Institute, I find that the first "Newsletter" from each country presents a special problem: how best to introduce it?

When I first went to Papua and New Guinea, I attempted the sort of introduction that runs the risk of rendering its sequels of no more interest than footnotes and qualifications to the first. In the case of West Irian, I tried to show the texture of that tortured province's administrative, political, social and economic problems through a single, perhaps too minutely detailed, case-study. But, now, what of the Solomons?

The population of the Solomons, according to the latest official estimate, is 161,525; its total land area 11,500 square miles, dotted through 300,000 square miles of ocean; the number of its islands, uncertain, a new island having emerged from the sea just last year; its people, Melanesian, Polynesian, Micronesian, European, Chinese, and "other", in that order; and, finally, its history: discovered by Mendana in 1568, and then lost again — with the exception of a far-flung atoll which Tasman visited in 1643 — until 1767; and a British possession since 1893. And now, ladies and gentlemen, the country coming up through the window on the other side of the aircraft is ..., with a population of ..., area ..., and history ....

But, then, each country has a special flavour of its own, and one feels tempted to stop, to start again, to begin as simply and as eloquently as James Michener did in Tales of the South Pacific with that special yearning for a place that ... in the end, led to a Broadway hit:

"I wish I could tell you about the South Pacific. The way it actually [is]."



For the first time, we are not in northern Australia surrounded by two and a quarter million anxious, envious, excluded strangers; nor in an Asian province where the coastal women perform their traditional dances in bras because bare breasts offended Sukarno's sensibilities, while thousands of forgotten highlanders dwell in the same isolated irrelevance to the external world as they ever have. For the first time, I am conscious of that rather special mixture which has made the South Seas famous, Melanesia as I know it but this time in a special atmosphere of unreality. Again, Michener, the writer who made it possible for many Americans to remember the South Pacific as it should have been:

"The endless ocean. The infinite specks of coral we called islands. Coconut palms nodding gracefully toward the ocean. Reefs upon which waves broke into spray, and inner lagoons, lovely beyond description. ... the sweating jungle, the full moon rising behind the volcanoes ...",

instead of:

"... the waiting. The timeless, repetitive waiting. ...",  
and Guadalcanal:

"that godforsaken backwash of the world. ...".

But Michener was, and still is, right, completely right, about one thing:

"... whenever I start to talk about the South Pacific, people intervene. I try to tell somebody what the steaming Hebrides were like, the first thing you know I'm telling about the old Tonkinese woman who used to sell human heads. As souvenirs. For fifty dollars!"

And all I've seen are necklaces of human finger-bones for sale in the New Guinea highlands at three dollars a finger. And, then there was the time ....

Somehow, always, whether one's story is better, worse, or just different, "the people" — especially, for some strange reason — the people of the Solomons, "intervene". So be it, for not infrequently these self-same people tell us something very important about ourselves, for they are no longer just a few more isolated people in the "Savage Solomons", but, above all, people, who are increasingly involved in our affairs, if still in their own way ... like the politician whose faith in the cause of the free world led naturally to the belief that there should be freedom from want throughout the Solomons, because "if we want to try something no one should stop us. It is our country"; or the parliamentarian who explained to his anxious constituents that the Protectorate's mining laws were necessary because the world is round, and if the government did not control their land, and decide who could mine where, someone might well dig a hole all the way through to America, and then there would be trouble; or the humble voter who pointed out just why he opposed the introduction of a local government council head-tax on women:

if women must pay tax, then they will have to earn it from the men;  
if that happens, then there will be many children, and the  
government must build a big house for the children;  
and then the people will get angry, and try to axe each other, as  
they did before;  
and there will be big trouble on our island.

As the above implies, I am visiting the Solomons in response to the two urges that have dominated my "Newsletters" to date: the urge to travel; and the urge to justify this by studying elections. On this occasion, I have travelled to observe the first elections to, and the first meeting of, the new Governing Council of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate — events that will probably not rate a single line in Time, Life, or Newsweek, the Pacific islands' main links with "civilisation", apart from the Pacific Islands Monthly, their sole link with each other and Australia.

The Solomons would, therefore, seem to be a long way from world concerns, that is the world's concern with the Solomons. But the Solomons themselves are not so far from the rest of the world as to fail to be concerned, affected, interested, by what goes on outside, albeit in the Solomons' own special way. If Americans no longer think about the Solomons, just as many Americans complain that their sterling work in wartime has been forgotten in Papua and New Guinea, the people of the Solomon Islands



An old joke ...

have not forgotten them; they have not been allowed to. There are signs, put up by Americans, all over Honiara, to remind them as they sit down in their houses, as they walk their busy way ..., and they are grateful ..., again, in the Solomons' own special way.

And so, to introduce the Solomons — quite unfairly, atypically, yet, I trust, entertainingly — with a story that blends "the people", local politics, America, and international affairs of the utmost gravity ....

The Dilemma of a Foreign War Coupled with Domestic Racial Crisis:  
The British Solomon Islands in 1967

1967 was the first year in the modern history of the Solomons in which a number of public grievances and aspirations not only became "issues", but were provided with an institutional means for their expression, discussion, and resolution. For the first time, the "national" parliament of the Solomons contained some — still a minority — of members who had been elected by the indigenous people of that country. For the first time since the early postwar years, it seemed to many insiders as well as their observers that the Solomons were "on the move", a result of the articulation of many people's hopes and grudges through the newly constituted Legislative Council that had been set up expressly to provide a means for their expression. And there were many, perhaps small, but certainly deeply felt, potential issues in the air.

Our story is concerned with the coalescence of two such "issues", which are familiar, singly and in combination, to most Americans: resentment at racial discrimination, and a concern with the Vietnam war. But we proceed too fast ....

"General" Salaka as many of his friends, and even more of his acquaintances and critics, once called him, is now the newly, controversially, elected member for Honiara in the B.S.I.P. Governing Council, the Legislative Council's successor. He is a thirty-three-year-old former seminarian, who first came to public notice during 1967 as one of the extra-legislative, indeed almost extra-constitutional, catalysts in getting the Solomons "on the move".

Peter Salaka has, he says, "a very very keen interest in the defence of the Pacific", and, in consequence of this, a genuine concern with the war in Vietnam. Thus, very early in 1967, he wrote a letter to the "Officer-in-charge of the Armed Forces, Washington D.C., U.S.A." to

volunteer his services with the United States Navy in South Vietnam. The letter evidently found its way through the labyrinthine corridors of the Pentagon, for an answer was not long in coming back: in reply to his query, the anxious volunteer was told, he was unfortunately ineligible for recruitment into the U.S. Navy as he was over the age for "signing on", and doubly ineligible because he was not an American citizen.

Upon receipt of the initial rejection, however, the volunteer refused to be daunted, and wrote to the American Embassy in Australia volunteering to go to Vietnam as part of the American armed forces, or, if need be, with the Red Cross. On this occasion, he was not so much rejected as put off. According to the documents the embassy sent him, Peter Salaka could not become an American serviceman unless and until he became a U.S. citizen; and, to become a citizen, he had to find someone in America who would be willing to give him a job. Once settled there, and working, he could apply for naturalization as an American citizen after only six months. However, as he had no special skills, it would be hard to find employment in the U.S.A.

Both the American Immigration Department and the American Consulate in Fiji kindly sent the appropriate application-forms for a would-be worker in, and citizen of, the United States. Their cumulative import was as follows: he could not fight with the U.S. Navy in Vietnam unless he were an American; in order to become an American, he would have to go to America; and to gain entry to the U.S., he required a guarantee of work. It would not pay, the Immigration people pointed out, for a Solomon Islander to spend a lot of money to get to the U.S. with no job there, and the possibility that he might fail his military exams. Caught!

A little later in 1967, Peter received a second letter from the consulate in Suva. The United States, the letter said, was fighting in Vietnam at the invitation of the South Vietnamese government. There was no reason why he should not go, but it would have to be of his own accord, and at his own expense ....



an experience ...  
remembered.

Now it would be foolish to imagine that, in a country the size of the Solomons, with gossip the main medium of communication, anything can remain a secret for very long. Anyway, Peter saw no reason to be secretive about his ambitions. So he told a few friends, and they told their friends, and then they .... And in a matter of hours, people began to contact their local U.S. recruiting agent. People rang him up at work; they wrote letters to him from all over the Solomons; they visited his office, and his home. When he woke up in the morning, there would be people lined up outside, asking to be recruited. Labourers left their plantations to visit him in Honiara — "they really wanted to fight,"

he said later, "because the name of the Joes, Americans ..., they really wanted to fight with them." Finally, a government official was forced to write to administration officers in the districts, to tell them that people from outlying areas should not come to Honiara to be recruited as they would not be going .... In Peter's words, "the whole of the Solomons was on the move."

Having received the letter indicating that a volunteer force was free to go to South Vietnam at its own expense, Peter began to record the names of his volunteers. The Solomons, he was able to inform the American government in a letter, stood ready to supply 153 volunteers for South Vietnam, including two staff nurses, some Gilbertese settlers, and two of the Protectorate's Chinese residents.

This last letter was referred by the government of the United States to the government of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Peter was called into the government secretariat and interviewed by a man whom he knew to be a high official. Peter's reasons for the recruitment drive were quite clear:

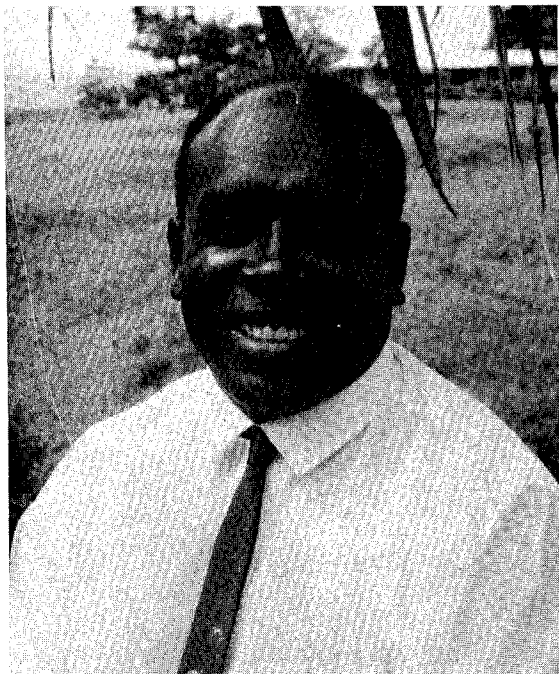
"I told them [the secretariat] that the U.S. is in trouble and it is no good to sit down and watch while others are dying, defending the cause of freedom. I was convinced that the Americans are ... like our umbrella, defending all the peace-loving countries, and I want to participate in this ... because the Americans came to the Solomons in 1942-45, and this is more or less, you could say, our thanksgiving to the U.S. people.

"I have a very keen interest in the defence of the Pacific, and I thought that by taking these people there, we could prove ourselves worthy to serve in the armed forces. When Britain eventually withdraws from Southeast Asia, then Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, will have the burden of defending this area. I thought that in the long run we could be considered as taking a bigger part, some part, in the defence of these islands. I really want to show the world that we are as good as anyone else in the armed forces, and taking these people over there would give them much-needed education in practical ways ....

"I do not believe that the people in the world really know where the Solomons lie, and its people, and by getting into this we would draw attention to these islands."

The senior government official listened, perhaps wary — as a Britisher — of the high hopes and expectations aroused by the American impact during World War II. As Peter himself observed, "it's not only going there and fighting that makes me want to go there, it's all the other things involved" — a latent nationalism, the search for security, and the possibility of employment.

The official's answer was mild: the Protectorate administration was simply not in a position to finance the transmigration of 153 volunteers to fight in South Vietnam. There was nothing to prevent the volunteers



Peter Salaka

from leaving the Solomons, to join the Red Cross or whatever other organisation would accept them, bar the lack of finance.

In the circumstances, the official concluded, why not, however, use your knowledge and influence to do something here, in the Solomons? We have our own troubles here, so why worry about other people's troubles elsewhere in the world?

Now, government is nothing if not influential in the Solomons, so Peter heeded the official's advice, and turned his potential army to quite effective domestic use ....

As we said before, the Solomons was "on the move" in many ways, especially politically, in 1967, and, as might be expected in the circumstances, its fledgling legislators were especially self-conscious about achieving social acceptance for themselves. At that stage, overt racial discrimination was in some ways the counterfoil to acceptance,

especially in a certain Honiara hotel, where, as one planter put it, "the manager used to sit by the door himself to make sure he kept out colour." Almost inevitably, then, one of the new parliamentarians' first attempts to assert their constitutional status and authority was concerned with seeing that "colour" got inside ....

However, even before the parliamentary select committee on the Liquor Ordinance could hold its first hearing, Peter Salaka had begun to turn his army's energies, as officialdom had advised, to things domestic. First of all, he went to the elected members to offer them his army. But they preferred to try their own techniques. Then he went to the hotel management and offered up an ultimatum: the hotel would be integrated within twenty-eight days, or Peter and his army would sit inside it till it was desegregated, or pull it down around their ears.

Different people attribute the hotel's successful integration to a variety of factors, or — alternatively — blame its decline in "standards" on different pressure-groups, in parliament or among Honiara's unemployed. Either way, a latent sense of nationalism, of gratitude for America's past help, and concern with foreign wars and human dignity and self-respect, had coalesced, and found practical expression, in a manner which would seem quite impossible of imitation beyond the South Seas. Does the U.S. President realise that governments other than that of the United States have also been beleaguered by domestic crisis, catalysed and deepened by a foreign war, in the recent past, or does he know but find small solace

for himself in the precedent set by the bizarre combination of events that transpired in the far-distant Solomons?

Yours Sincerely,

*Edward Wolfers.*

P.S. For the more doubtful of my readers, I swear that the above is true, at least as true as my informants are honest and their stories verifiable, for the very business of survival in the Solomons requires — as Jack London wrote (in The Terrible Solomons) — that "the white man ... must ... fail to be too long on imagination."

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