

SEPTEMBER 29, 1994

The big change from Indonesia to Papua New Guinea peaked at the port of entry at Vanimo, a short hop across the border. Courteous natives helped fill out the entry forms and directed me through the proper steps. Large English-speaking officers dug to the bottom of my duffel and demanded to know my business.

Once the luggage passed through a curtained door, reboarding rang of the days of the first airlines in Texas, when passengers stood around chatting at a gate without tag or ticket to reclaim their bags.

The next leg was a 35- minute flight to Wewak on the Bismarck Sea. Wewak's fame connects to World War II. Fourteen kilometers to the west of town at Cape Worn, the Japanese surrendered in September of 1945. So many squatter camps of refugees from Indonesia and displaced villagers from the highlands live in Wewak today that travelers are warned against driving out to the famous surrender site except in big groups of people.

From the airport to the hotel, I saw enough misery in the camps to confirm the warnings. Guides come in many colors over the world, but one thing they have in common is they never answer a question that casts a negative light upon their bailiwick.

The guy showing me around laughed and joked and made the visit special. When he dropped me off in the evening, he said, "Sir (actually, 'Sar'), please do not go out again until I pick you up in the morning."

He was a brute of a man, obviously uncomfortable wearing a pair of huge unlaced shoes. I liked his squeaky giggle, especially laughing at my stories. We had a fine time riding around the countryside, entertaining each other.

The best proof of the danger, however, was a tall chain-link fence around a Catholic bishop's home. Thirty years ago, this intrepid gentleman piloted his own plane back in the bush among cannibals and headhunters. If His Excellency needed a cyclone fence and two big police dogs, I figured the hotel lobby would provide all the excitement I could stand.

Up high in the hills, stone memorials inscribed in Japanese script mark the site of mass burial grounds of Nippon soldiers. Markers say of the 100,000 Japanese occupying forces in New Guinea, 13,000 remained alive at surrender date.

Rusted helmets, a broken machinegun and a few grenades rest at the base of the stone. Mines and bombs still explode from jungle fires in the area. The guide said a desperate battle raged off these hillsides down through a swamp to the distant coastline. I found myself staring at the army surplus binocular case tied to my waist, wondering how many million yards of olive green material wasted away under fire and human sweat.

Afterwards, we drove to the memorial honoring the Allied forces. Palm trees lined a long drive up to the monument. All the way, brass markers named different divisions and armies. The place was trim and neat, but not a soul was in sight, guards or visitors.

The hotel desk kept no reservation records. Trans-New Guinea Tour booked the rooms, but without a book, I suppose it was like open seating on the planes. However, as the matter settled itself, I discovered strangers coming in the hotel had unloaded my bags.

Folks kept saying hello and smiling, but not for money. Tipping in New Guinea means a communal jar on the desk or on the bar to pay for the employees' Christmas party. Americans break stride where we can't hand out bills and coins to the help. We lose our equilibrium and hang our ring fingers in our pockets if we can't tip everybody from the guy stoking the basement furnace to the upstairs maids.

But in Papua, ten-dollar steaks ran close to 20 bucks. By the time I reached the center of a cut, I was too exhausted from chewing to notice the service.

I never was in a town big enough to find a bank open, or a money exchange. The hotels took travelers checks in dollars and converted them at a 20% plus discount into Kinas, the Papua New Guinea currency. Credit cards weren't accepted. I had a tough time covering my action with dollars worth only 80 cents.

Bottled water wasn't available. The English sodas, an item left over from the days of Australian rule, cost \$2.95. So I cut the soda bill by treating rain water in iodine tablets, and reducing intake by taking baths, in hopes osmosis might quench the insatiable thirst of being in the tropics on the equator.

One day and a night was enough time in Wewak. I stored my big duffel at the hotel and took an early charter flight up to the Karawari River in the East Sepik district.

In the dawn's light at the airfield, men in breechcloths walked by carrying bows and fishing arrows and barbed spears. These were bushy-headed hombres from the desperate squatters' camps. I didn't need a second reminder to wait for my guide's directions....