

SHORT.DOC

The charter flying from Kawari up into the Southern Highlands of New Guinea fitted the scene. Compressed baggage room added space on a cushion for two more passengers. Long ago, the vent covers on the cabin windows had vibrated off. Passengers stuffed bandannas in the holes to keep warm and reduce the air blast. Only an aviation historian could have identified the plane.

We landed close to mountains of some 7000 to 9000 feet high. We kept our coats on to leave the plane. Night readings drop to the 40s in the Highlands. The terminal's waiting room consisted of a cyclone fence corral and a locked gate.

Between the runway's guard post and this corral, a steady stream of people passed wearing human hair wigs, chalked faces and blurred body tattoos. Women dressed in faded grass skirts led hogs by the front feet and trailed the pigs on leashes; groups of three and four men, wearing feathered wigs, squatted in tight circles, playing a gambling game of chips and cards.

All males carried a machete, or a small axe, or maybe a bow or spear. The lodge's bus took 45 minutes going back in the mountains. Once, as we passed a roadside collection of beer drinkers, a rock blapped the bus's tailgate. However, later on, I charged the hit to road conditions and my apprehension at the sight of so many wild bushmen.

Huli warriors spit on their palms after shaking hands with us to wash away the white people's evil spirits. So if they rocked the bus, I figured we could always whammy up enough bad medicine to pay them back.

Ambua Lodge is one of the Trans New Guinea Tours' chain of hostelryes. The manager arranged the day trips and provided a famed nature guide. We'd leave at dawn and be dropped off four or five miles up in the mountains with our lunches and water flasks.

The clay soils and road gravels were slick as ice flow. I took three bad falls and did five arm-swinging recoveries that ended up with a pack strap wrapped around my neck. By the time I raised my field glasses and lifted my hat brim to see better, I'd be so distracted keeping my balance that the birds had flown into the brush. I charged a lot of the stumbling to age, until the guide slipped down on a gentle slope.

We saw Birds of Paradise with plumage and wire-like tails as luxuriant as the pea fowls around an emperor's palace; we rolled over rich sounding names, like "the King of Saxony," or "Sickle Bills," or "Ribbon Tails." Wild orchids and vivid mountain flowers decorated the road. Gnarled-looking men, walking in pairs, passed by, but only the guide acknowledged their presence.

Only a short time ago, scientists discovered that the Hooded Pitohui bird in New Guinea has poison feathers to protect it from predators. This was the first such case in

modern man's knowledge of the 9200 species of birds over the world.

These microscope-oriented hombres claim credit for the discovery. I suspect, however, as attuned as the wild Huli tribes are to violence, they learned about poisonous feathers centuries ago.

I presented the theory to a missionary family staying at the lodge. Books say the Huli people were discovered in 1935. The missionary said his church spoke of finding new tribes as late as 1950. He agreed the Hulis probably knew about toxic feathers, but were so committed to stone age grudges, they were disinclined to discuss poisoned feathers, unless you might be interested in studying a feathered shaft swishing by your head.

The missionary's son helped at night looking up birds. At dinner, I asked if the men ever carried anything. I'd seen women leading big hogs by one front foot and packing heavy bilum bags around their necks, but the men never seemed to be at work.

The mother laughed. "No, wives are selected to be hard workers. Polygamy laws are enforced by the means a man has to support extra women and kids." She went on to say that churches may condone polygamy to keep from breaking up the family.

Later, I rephrased the question, and the little boy piped up and said, "Mother, the men do carry things. All of them carry axes or machetes."

The lodge offered to include me in the group going to sing/sings and dances at the villages, but I preferred the nature walks. One older American asked twice why I hadn't gone along to shop at the trading post, or gone to watch a big dance across the river.

Displeased by my silence, she said, "Mr. Noelke, if you don't want to shop or meet the people, just why did you bother to come to New Guinea?"

"My dear," I answered, "I came here to fulfill the lifelong ambition of having a Bird of Paradise tattooed on my back like a Huli warrior."

She hit her camera bag on the door leaving the lobby. For the rest of the time, she stayed over on the far side of the room.