

BOOK REVIEW

A matter of Conscience: Operation Rausim Kwik by Jerry Singirok. Singapore Routledge, 2022, 609 pp., K200 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5437-6882-4

~ Reviewed by Kenneth Sumbuk

E-mail: kemo107@icloud.com

This is General Singirok's epitome of his story in - A Matter of Conscience : Operation Rausim Kwik –

“Operation Rausim Kwik was planned with precision and executed with a highly motivated and professional team without whom it would have failed. Therefore, I take no personal credit. There was no influence from within or from outside. Evidently, it was my own decision based on my conscience that led me to plan and execute the operation. Conscience is indeed a gift from God”. (p.269)

Given the fact that the awarding of the Sandline contract of US\$36 million did not follow prescribed procurement procedures and was not signed by the Governor General, what Singirok's book does more is to encourage the spirits of Papua New Guineans already committed to good governance and transparency and also to convince those who are ambivalent and even more to change the opinion of good governance detractors.

“Operation Rausim Kwik” is in Tok Pisin and translates as “To get rid of quickly”, A matter of conscience is some succinctly retold account readers will be engulfed in as one engages in the events as they unfold in the 609 pages by the major player, Major General Jerry Singirok. As one reads and engage in the events as they unfold, what comes alive are real events and actions as experienced by the author and many actors mentioned in the book. These include the actual beginning of the Bougainville crises, the possible reasons and root causes of the crises from the view point of the Panguna land owners and their demands, the successes and failures of military operations on Bougainville, and the Bougainville Peace negotiations and agreements. Then there is the negotiation and engagement of Sandline International, the major state players in contract negotiations and the speed in which the contract was negotiated and how the US\$36 million was raised in record time. The planning and execution of Operation Rausim Kwik is absurd that it is nothing short of an action movie script. Not surprising though, the reactions and non-actions in the aftermath of Operation Rausim Kwik and the Commissions of Enquiry came up empty. At most the book is an autobiography of the life of General Singirok but specifically his personal involvement in the Bougainville Crises and how he planned and executed Operation Rausim Kwik, which in effect terminated the contract between the State and Sandline International.

The book is purposely divided into two parts. There are 10 Chapters in Part A with 271 pages and 9 chapters in PART B. Chapters 1 to 10 describe the events leading up to the engagement and the expulsion of the Sandline mercenaries from the country. Here General Singirok details the involvement of the major players in the then Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Chris Haiveta and the Defence Minister Mathias Ijape, including the author's initial involvement in facilitating the engagement of Sandline International. But most importantly the reasons for the author's change of mind and stance, the planning and precision of the actual expulsion of Sandline mercenaries. The nine chapters in Part B details an account of the author's formative years as a child, as a student and early carrier in the army. The rest of the chapters focus on the Bougainville crises itself, the possible reasons behind the crises and the author's involvement as a commander of two earlier operations on Bougainville. The concluding chapters focus on the author's life following the expulsion of the Sandline mercenaries and eventual retirement as a soldier.

The chapters in Part B are autobiographical in that the author narrates his life story. Born of a Madang father and a Sepik mother, General Singirok was raised in his father's Did village on Karkar island. He has a strong Karkar traditional essence infused in his upbringing with Lutheran religion and educational influence sprinkled all over it. As he takes you through his life story, Singirok continues to remind you of the fact that he is a Karkar islander, sharing with you the fondness of his deep rooted affinity to his Karkar roots. He passionately describes his primary schooling days, then the four years of high schooling, which he states in his own words, as the shaping point of his career defining experience. He learnt to fend for himself and developed the independence of mind and personality traits that influenced the decisions and actions he took in his career. There General Singirok learnt to associate and relate to students from other regions of the country. His selection and attendance of Sogeri Senior High School (now Sogeri Secondary School) further defined and strengthen the attributes he began developing in Asaroka Lutheran High School in the Eastern Highlands. "Indeed, the experiences gained at Asaroka over four years would play a large role in my grounding for the bigger world". (p 313)

The root of the Bougainville crises is associated with the resentment of local land owners of the Panguna mine operated by the Bougainville Coper Limited. The local land owners felt that since the opening of the mine in 1972, they were not equally benefiting from the billions of dollars of earnings from the mine. Compounded with that, they were beginning to feel the effects of the environment damage that was clearly evident from the open pit and the severe environment and social impacts of the mine that was taking its toll on the people. The crises initially began with labour disputes and then to violent actions and eventual sabotage of mine property and installations by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army. This lead to the eventual demand and proclamation of independence from the rest of Papua New Guinea.

The engagement of Sandline International was accomplished with such speed that it took every body by surprise, except for persons entrusted with the responsibility of negotiating, engaging and managing the Sandline mercenaries. Preceding and following the signing of the Sandline contract, secrete overseas trips were taken by a number of key players including Ministers of the Crown. At that time, PNG was experiencing a sluggish economic down turn. The speed of negotiations and the quickness of responsible Minsters and officials to secure the US\$36 million created suspicion, given that the PNG economy was struggling with cash flow challenges and a mounting internal and international debt compounded with low foreign reserves. In hindsight, when viewing these unfolding events, one ponders and queries if the speediness to conclude the Sandline deal was genuinely undertaken for a peaceful solution to the Bougainville crises?

As I read through this book, I could not stop thinking about General Singirok's mind set in planning and executing Operation Rausim Kwik. What was he thinking, going up against an executive government directive? Being an Army General, his job was to execute the officially sanctioned decision of the executive government. Given his training and proven colourful military accomplishment, he knew better that a directive from the executive government is a command. Any slightest sign of insubordination on his part will have severe consequences. Knowing too well the consequences of what he was mooting 'Operation Rausim Kwik', he still went ahead with the plan. The success of Operation Rausim Kwik came down to one important factor "TRUST". That he trusted and believed his own judgement and that he had complete trust in the men he personally hand-picked to execute Operation Rausim Kwik.

Very few Army Generals would even think of or attempt what General Singirok did. To his credit, his plan to expel the Sandline mercenaries was successfully mounted and executed without a single gunshot.

What General Singirok displayed was authentic leadership. He planned and executed Operation Rausim Kwik using his military training and experience. In doing so, he went up against the expected norm of being a General. He used his position as the General of the PNG Army, his military training and experience in relating to the Bougainvillians in a real life situation. This is what distinguishes General Singirok from others. That he was just being himself as a unique leader. This is what leadership calls for when confronted with a difficult situation and when one has to make a decision. He was being a real leader and the decision he took was a practical decision that had to be made. Whether to accept the decision of the executive government in engaging the Sandline mercenaries that had the potential of alienating PNG citizens on Bougainville to oblivion or to go up against the decision and expel the mercenaries from the country before they set foot on Bougainville soil.

While the decision to expel the Sandline mercenaries was militarily planned and executed, the decision was humanly motivated. Whether it was democratically, legally, militarily or

constitutionally wrong, the human factor brought about the consciousness in General Singirok to take that stand and plan and execute Operation Rausim Kwik.

While the book is at most an autobiography, it has lessons for leadership and the ability and art of making informed and calculated decisions. Indeed, one of the most important lessons learnt from General Singirok is that when making decisions that have the potential of catastrophic repercussions on self should the planned action go wrong, the leaders making them must have utmost belief in the decisions they are taking. General Singirok knew very well that, the decision he took had every reason for him being removed as the General, court marshalled and/or imprisoned for many years, thus destroying his family and welfare of his children. (p129) Singirok's leadership as a General was authentic in that it built and used trust effectively to achieve the intended outcome. The mutual trust he had in his men and them in him enabled General Singirok to lead the army in planning, executing and eventual expulsion of Sandline. That Singirok as a General not only called on his military training and experience but on his upbringing as a Karkar islander with good grounding of traditional family traits, education and Lutheran principles. Notably, his quick succession in being promoted to a General did not change Singirok. In fact, what made him successful before he was promoted to a General made him become a successful commander and General. He did not leave his personality and human traits behind when he became a General but used these traits as his assets as a General. General Singirok was always conscious of himself, his surroundings and trusted them, thus "A Matter of Conscience".

Kenneth Sumbuk

E-mail: kemo107@icloud.com

Note:

For the executive government's view on the Bougainville Crises, but especially the engagement and expulsion of the Sandline mercenaries from the country, it is important to read Sir Julius Chan's memoir "Playing the Game – Life and Politics in Papua New Guinea". In Chapters 15 to 22, Sir Julius details the Bougainville Crises and the engagement of Sandline from his perspective as the Prime Minister then.

References

Chan, J (2016). *Playing the Game. Life and Politics in Papua New Guinea*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press