

“The Grasberg Mine Visit, Irian Jaya”

(Compiled from journal excerpts and archived email correspondence)

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November 15, 2001, Grasberg Mine, Papua, Indonesia (formerly Irian Jaya...)

‘Well, look where I am!’ I thought to myself. ‘I’ve got myself all the way to Irian Jaya and the famous Grasberg mine!’

It was lunch break for the office staff and I was taking a jet-lag-impaired stroll to observe all that might be seen in a 45-minute walk from the exploration office.

‘Geez, this place is beautiful! However, one could be bored with monotonous jungle and clouds everyday. Hmm, how odd. The clouds snake around the cliffs like they are *sentient* or something alive, like the sleeves of God maybe. Boy, I would need to see a blue sky and wide open places once in a while – flatland that you can walk on without fear of tumbling off into the ethos...’ I continued my personal tour.

Someone told me that Tembagapura in the local dialect of Bahasa means “rocks, rice, and rumors.” I believe that. The prior evening, rumor at dinner was the Papuans were mustering in groups and collecting crude resources for “a big event” on the anniversary of their December 2nd Independence Day rioting of the previous year. They had been upset over the way the Indonesian government was pocketing taxes from the mining on the formerly named ‘Irian Jaya’ and were rioting for independence on the basis of taxation without representation. Sound familiar? In a

complicated process, the government of Indonesia renamed this region of the big island into three regions with three names utilizing “Papua” in some part, after the original, indigenous name. That action seemed to satisfy (or confuse) the locals -- for a while. After I left, the name of the place and separatist movements continue to make what-to-call-this-place quite complicated. At the time, though, I speculated the new name was interpreted by locals to mean they had won their independence, when what had actually occurred was – a new name. In any case, no one I worked with seemed put out by the upcoming anniversary of rioting. Just a bunch of rock throwing and flashing of painted naked man-parts was to be expected.

At midday break, the office staff I had been coaching on the use of core-logging software disappeared. I could have stolen a nap from the jaws of my jet-lag monster, but instead decided to take a walk and see what was to be seen in this exotic place. No telling when / if I would ever be back. I arrived at the company heli-pad, wondered why I hadn’t been flown from the airport at sea level some 20 kilometers nearly straight down, and spared the vertical bus ride up the cliffs. I hoped to see an arriving “bird” when I noticed a smoky spire in the jungle. A small clearing was going on. The Amungme and Dani burn the jungle down to its roots, then plant sweet potatoes. They hack away at the perpetual new growth over the next few weeks until they can’t fight it any more. By then, they have a meek harvest.

At the heli-pad, I saw a great brawny Dani man coming out of the jungle carrying a big bow-like Atlatl (-- the thing that catapults spears by an extension attached to the wrist). His atlatl spears were long as javelins (from Java?). The guy had emerged from a seemingly abandoned metal building (how do they do that? They simply appear out of the mist and shadows like magic!) He went uphill to the back door where some local Papuans live. This warrior had a bone in his nose and red paint on his face and belly and he was shouldering about 20 spears at least 6 feet long in a bundle like sticks. He looked me directly in the eye as he passed and I asked him,

“Hi, are those spears?” (Or a Bahasa dictionary rendition of that.) I was wondering what kind of unfortunate critter would be the target of his aim. No reply. Silent, astute, jungle man passing....

‘Hmm, way too big for a bird,’ I thought to myself. ‘There aren’t any animals bigger than a cat up here anyway. No deer. No bears. Hmm... Hey! Wait a minute!’ I visualized the velocity, force, and piercing power of the long pointy sticks.

‘Shish-kabob tribal enemy! Shish-kabob geo girl!’ I timidly made my way back to the nice exploration office where all situations are benign (great black hole of time, that office) where I should have remained ensconced all day in the first place.

November 16th, 2001, Grasberg Mine, Papua, Indonesia

A geotech drove me around inside the underground workings this afternoon. You simply get in a Toyota Hilux truck (one with a snorkel) and drive right into the adit. It’s like a James Bond movie-set in there, except the underground world is not all smooth and dry or lit up by electricity. The illumination is from the headlights and the ribs (walls) and ceiling are craggy, exposed rock. A steady stream of water flows along the ground, like in a regular mining drift so you drive through it like driving upstream in a recon mission.

David, my driver, drove amazingly fast through the workings like he was headed home through the backwoods. The ride was bit like a rodeo bumping up and down in the cab hardhat against the ceiling and hands braced against the dashboard. I have no idea how they find their way around down there through all the turns and junctions. At intersections, cables dangle from the roof at window level on the driver’s side for him to yank. This action activates a light to change from green to red, so no one else will enter that drift until he gets out of there. At the end of that stretch, he yanks on another dangling cable to change the red light to green again. Sometimes, though, you come head-on to another vehicle despite this system and it is simply a jousting tournament Hilux vs. underground haulage equipment. David actually speeds up when there is an oncoming set of headlights. I haven’t figured out if he is trying to make it to a known pullout in time, or if he’s just trying to impress me.

I like to be underground in the Grasberg mine. The walls I saw were not covered with shotcrete probably because it is very massive, competent limestone in this area. Consequently, the geology

was exposed (in brief glimpses from under my rocking hardhat) as the headlights streaked across the ribs of the drift. I watched for structure, fractures sets, and the stain of mineralization but it was mostly all uniformly gray to my view from the passenger seat...

The rats are very noisy in the underground logging facility. You can hear their big feet flopping across the suspended roof tiles (the facility is like a surface office – ceiling tiles, overhead lighting, warm, dry, office spaces, coffee machine – you would never know you are more than a thousand feet underground!). The rats really get to squabbling with each other, bitching about rat issues to the point they aren't paying much attention to what's going on around them. I watched two of them in a corner under a table sitting back on their haunches squeaking with all their might, little bellies puffing, little arms sticking out absorbed in tirade. I asked one of the geotechs what he thought they might be bitching about (in similar dictionary-derived terms). He said,

“Complain want more food.”

“Sure not angry?” I asked.

“No. Mouse want more food” and he threw them a piece of some flabby, yellow stuff he had been snacking on, (not one of the desiccated Tilapia fish so popular in this region for snacking). The bitching rats almost missed it in their discourse. He had to toss a second portion.

November 19th, 2001, Grasberg Mine, Papua, Indonesia

We couldn't decide which came first, the jungle chicken or the egg. I wanted to see the equatorial glaciers. Irian Jaya (Papua) has the closest-to-the-Equator glaciers on the planet. That is due to the stark elevation contrast going from sea level to a vertical 4884 meters in less than 25 kilometers horizontal distance! While journeying way up in the craggy, treeless highlands, I saw a fat little bird leap away from the truck along the ground across a huge natural slide of limestone blocks. There wasn't a stick, leaf, or plant in site. Back in the States, this would be a good place for marmots or pica, but no such critters live here. I asked David,

“What that?”

He answered, “Hutan Ayam” (jungle chicken).

I argued, “No jungle here.”

He replied, “comes here from jungle.”

I looked around at barren, glaciated landscape and asked further, “what jungle chicken eat?”

He waited a moment before replying with fatigued effort, “eat jungle.”

It occurred to me in that moment that my devoted driver and patient companion, David, didn’t know what the jungle chicken eats and was making it up. So, I asked,

“What Cassowarie eat?” (Cassowarie is a ridiculously big, dangerous bird that lives at lower elevations in the mangrove forest. Cassowarie can kill people and the locals are wary of it when bushwhacking.)

David said, “Cassowarie eat rice.”

Now, I knew he was making it up. I pestered him further,

“Cassowarie eat dead man?”

“...No”, said David hesitantly. He was slightly caught off guard.

“Maybe Cassowarie eat dead man if no rice?” I suggested. I was not going to let him off so easy – maybe it was one of those in-between jet-lag moments of clear thought and energy.

“No. Cassowarie not eat dead mans ever.” He sighed and I knew it was time to let him drive question-free.

So, that was the end of that. Poor David, having to utilize all the capacities of his brain all the while driving and keeping me entertained in English.

I am coming home today.

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