

# A matter of conscience? Jerry Singirok, Sandline and Bougainville

by Henry Ivarature

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Jerry Singirok spoke on radio in March on the anniversary of Operation Rausim Kwik

Photo Credit: [\(Jerry Singarok/Facebook\)](#)



In May 1989, PNG's Bougainville copper mine was permanently shut down after disgruntled landowners supported by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army began sabotaging critical mine infrastructure. A secessionist war ensued until 2001 when the signing of the Bougainville Peace Agreement ended it. In the intervening years lawlessness beset Bougainville, government facilities were destroyed, basic services evaporated, chaos and factionalism took hold, and hundreds lost their lives.

In August 1994, Julius Chan, upon becoming prime minister, vowed to end the crisis before the 1997 general election. His strategy was mixed – work with the Bougainville transitional government, pursue peace negotiations, and step-up military operations. But the secessionists remained resolute on independence. In October 1995, Chan appointed Jerry Singirok commander of the army, and tasked him to defeat the rebels. When Singirok, like others before him, failed, Chan **turned to a private military contractor, Sandline International**, for help. The Sandline contract, negotiated in secret and worth US\$36 million, was signed on 31 January 1997.

Foreign mercenaries and an elite special forces unit (SFU), which Singirok created, were to eliminate the rebels and reopen the copper mine. On 18 February 1997, as preparations were underway to execute Operation Oyster, an Australian journalist Mary-Louise O'Callaghan exposed the Sandline contract. Chan denied it until Singirok, in an address to the nation on Radio Kalang on 17 March 1997, told

listeners he had unilaterally aborted it. Singirok was sacked that night.

In the same address he called on Chan, his deputy and finance minister Christopher Haiveta and defence minister Mathias Ijape to resign within 48 hours. Alleging that the contract was corrupt, Singirok called for a caretaker government to investigate it. Before going public Singirok's SFU executed Operation Rausim Kwik, detaining Sandline executives – including head of Sandline, Tim Spicer – and mercenaries, to deport them.

In his autobiography, titled *A Matter of Conscience* and published last year, Singirok describes how he struggled with his conscience as he meticulously planned Operation Rausim Kwik. It's his personal account, including of military tours on Bougainville and personal sacrifices, especially an injury from a rescue operation that nearly cost his life.

Singirok, like Chan in *Playing the Game* and Spicer in *An Unorthodox Soldier*, also seeks to justify his actions. Singirok, prior to publication of his book, described his decision to abort Operation Oyster as a “matter of principle”. If it were, as Singirok's book title suggests, “a matter of conscience”, then the decision of Chan's government to engage a private military contractor to kill its citizens should have been sufficient for Singirok to oppose the engagement of Sandline from the start. In fact, along with others, Singirok facilitated Operation Oyster until Sandline was contracted and paid US\$18 million on 31 January 1997. He says he did not expect the government to find the money to fund the contract. In his book, Singirok excuses his initial support for the contract by saying he was focused on “tactical” and “strategic issues”.

On 30 January 1997, Singirok and others tried, unsuccessfully, to have Haiveta and Chan renegotiate the contract in favour of the state. Singirok omits the fact that on the same day he and defence secretary James Melegepa, under political pressure, recommended the contract to proceed.

Several developments about the contract bothered Singirok. It was making him lose his command of the army. It smelled of corruption and some politicians stood to benefit from it. His observations were aroused by the coincidental meeting of Haiveta, Ijape and Spicer with Sandline executives in Hong Kong soon after US\$18 million was transferred to the Sandline Holdings account. Haiveta not only found money, but cleverly thwarted public finance procedures to sign the contract. Bougainville Copper Limited shares which were dormant were suddenly traded by undisclosed sources in the Australian stock exchange. These developments deepened Singirok's suspicions about the contract and motivated him to act. But they are inconsequential to the unconscionable decision to hire Sandline in the first

place.

In fact, Singirok started planning Operation Rausim Kwik on 22 February 1997, just days after the contract was leaked to the media. If it were not exposed, would Singirok have acted to stop the contract?

There is also the fact that several major incidents happened under Singirok's watch that threatened his job. Operation High Speed II failed in July 1996. On Kangu Beach, in September 1996, not only were 12 soldiers brutally massacred but five were taken hostage. In October 1996, Theodore Miriung, premier of the Bougainville transitional government, was assassinated, allegedly involving soldiers. Was Singirok concerned with keeping his position as PNG's military head? He does not address this question in the book.

There is also the awkward matter that Singirok himself received corrupt payments from another arms supplier. If these had not been exposed, would his conscience have forced him to disclose them? In the book he admits he was wrong to accept the payments, which later cost him his job as a soldier.

Singirok contends his action was not a coup d'état. He tries to validate it by referencing a statement from one of the two subsequent inquiries, which said the "orders speak for themselves". However, there is no escaping the fact that Singirok set a precedent – that of the army acting against the state. Regrettably, Singirok dares future commanders to repeat his example, even suggesting that Operation Rausim Kwik ought to be taught in educational institutions as a positive tale. In fact, what transpired is that democracy was threatened, the PNG defence force's reputation was seriously damaged, and command and control within the military dissipated.

Chan and his ministers did not resign. They stood aside after defeating a parliamentary motion to resign to allow for an inquiry to investigate the contract. Chan returned as PM a few months later, but lost the 1997 elections.

Even though by then Singirok had been charged with sedition, Chan's successor Bill Skate re-appointed Singirok commander in October 1998 (Chan had sacked him) and subsequently promoted him to major-general. In March 2000, Singirok was dismissed as a soldier upon been found guilty of failing to declare money he received from an arms dealer. The sedition charges were dropped on 4 March 2002 as the result of the prosecutors' failure to prepare a case. Important legal questions remain unanswered. As the sedition case was never heard, Singirok should not, as he does, claim to be acquitted and exonerated.

Singirok has told his tale in an oddly structured book in need of extensive editing, as

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well as less self-justification and more self-reflection. The tale of Sandline is not complete. It remains for other key actors to share their views, and for researchers to provide a more dispassionate view.

### **Disclosures:**

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### **Author/s:**

#### **Henry Ivarature**

Henry Ivarature is the Deputy Director, Strategic Engagements at the Pacific Security College, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University.

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