

Gordon Peake (far left) and Angel Pesevski (bottom right) with colleagues in Bougainville in 2016



Vale Angel Pesevski

By Gordon Peake
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Angel Pesevski, a former colleague who became a good friend, [passed away in Türkiye](#), one of the untold number of victims of the earthquake.

Angel and I met each other in 2016 in Buka, in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, where he was working as a management adviser in the aid project that I joined.

I recall walking into the office in Buka for the first time. He was perched in the corner of the jam-packed office, hunched over his computer, typing one of what I would later discover to be his beloved logframes. Although he looked different to the Bougainvillean staff who surrounded him, he was completely at home.

This was because he understood better than any of us what was going on in their minds. Angel was a Bosnian citizen who cut his teeth on international development projects in his native country. He knew only too well the “second class citizen in your own place” quality that can come from working in these sorts of set-ups, and was anxious to ensure Bougainvilleans didn’t feel that way. In demeanour and empathy, he showed tremendous commitment to making his Bougainvillean colleagues rise and believe in themselves. He had high professional standards, but even higher levels of understanding and compassion.

He also understood (in a way that I never will, as I take it for granted) the challenges of working in English. On that laptop of his he had Google Translate open and without fail, as he was preparing documents, he’d be typing in a phrase in his mother tongue to find out what the English equivalent was. He spoke more fluently the strangulated technical language of development than I did.

Technical advising is [hard, grinding, frequently unfulfilling work](#). I learned a lot from Angel about patience, structure, and the delicate dance between “pushing” and “stepping back” that is part of what makes a good technical adviser.

But the style that won him affection and commendation from his colleagues didn’t always fit as well with some of the powers-that-be. As a friend of mine observed, “the bureaucrats had

difficulty dealing with him. For them he was an enigma. A square peg in a round hole. A troublesome itch that needed to be moved on. When in fact he exemplified the perfect technical adviser.”

Passion, commitment, and preoccupation with templates would supercharge careers in aid programs, but sometimes those first two attributes can stall them every bit as much. As every contractor working on a short-term contract on an aid program knows, we serve completely at the pleasures of masters above us.

Angel left Bougainville at the end of 2016. On some occasions, “go pinis” parties for foreign advisers in Papua New Guinea are desultory affairs, attended out of a sense of obligation and fervent hope that the adviser will indeed “go pinis” and not come back. Not so for him. The staff threw him a huge party at one of their houses, and banded together to produce a video of pictures of him. His send-off was as warm and intense as the noonday Buka sun. He loved Bougainville, and his apartment on the little island of Sohano, where he’d sup Turkish coffee and fish soup (sometimes simultaneously) from his deck overlooking the Buka passage.

After his time in Buka he worked in Manila, and then came back to PNG to work on a project providing monitoring and evaluation services to health and education programs. His commitment to logframes remained undimmed. We joked that growing up in Tito’s Yugoslavia before the war fostered his obsession with plans. We both knew how difficult it is to harvest the promises of peace agreements.

I would often write references for Angel. I wrote him one for a position in his native Sarajevo, which he decided not to take up when offered at the same time a team leader position on an aid project in Türkiye: being a bona fide team leader of an aid project was his dream. And so off he went to south-eastern Türkiye. On such decisions are our fates settled. We were hoping to meet in Northern Ireland in August when some friends from PNG will visit. It is not to be.

The Bosnian novelist and Nobel Prize for Literature winner Ivo Andrić wrote that “great men die twice, once when they leave this world and a second time when their life work disappears”. The legacies of Angel’s methods, organisation and good humour reside in his former colleagues in Bougainville and no doubt the other places where he worked (among them Afghanistan, Philippines, Türkiye and his native Bosnia-Herzegovina). As the former Chief Secretary of the Autonomous Bougainville Government, [Joseph Nobetau, wrote on Twitter](#), “his contribution to Bougainville was not wasted”.

Angel Pesevski was a real unsung hero to this unsung land. May his memory be a blessing.

About the author/s

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Gordon Peake is a writer, podcaster and consultant. His first book was an award-winning memoir of life in Timor-Leste, his second on the would-be nation of Bougainville. He hosts the University of Adelaide podcast 'Statecraftiness'.

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