SOLOMON ISLANDS

COUNTRY READER
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Arma Jane Karaer 1997-2000 Ambassador, Solomon Islands

ARMA JANE KARAER
Ambassador
Solomon Islands (1997-2000)

Arma Jane Karaer was born in Minnesota in 1941. She received her bachelor's degree from University of Minnesota and during this time also attended Osmania University in India. During her career she had positions in Australia, Zaire, Turkey, Pakistan, Swaziland, Finland, and ambassadorships to Papau New Guinea, Soloman Islands, and Vanuatu. Ambassador Karaer was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.

Q: Let's move back and then we'll talk about some of these cases, but first let's sort of set the stage. Tell me about Papua New Guinea when you went out there in '97 would it be?

KARAER: Yes. I arrived there in March '97.

Q: Tell me about the sort of country and the government and economy and all and then we'll talk about what we were doing there.

KARAER: Of course, well, first of all, our embassy in Port Moresby is accredited to three countries, to the governments of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Vanuatu used to be called the New Hebrides before it became an independent country. I was really thrilled to go there, because one of the main reasons I joined the Foreign Service was to see the exotic part of the world. I'd spent a certain amount of time in Helsinki worrying that I didn't have the proper table manners to go to work in a European country that had so much silverware. I had spent most of my career in countries where you ate with your fingers. Frankly I was far more comfortable in that sort of a place. I loved learning about these cultures.

These three countries were among the last places on earth colonized by Europeans. European colonizers had stayed away from these places for a long time because they had a very scary reputation. That was because the indigenous folks were cannibals for the most part. If you got shipwrecked or you were a missionary who wandered too far from a European base, you ended up in a cooking pot. When I was a kid I saw cartoons about cannibals and I thought that this was supposed to represent somewhere in Africa. Well, I don't think there were many cannibals in Africa, but there definitely were cannibals in the South Pacific. Of course by the time I got there, everybody had been converted to one form of Christianity or another, and nobody was eating

anybody anymore, but a lot of these communities in the interior really hadn't been in touch with the 20th Century for very long at all. In fact one of the biggest concentrations of population on the island of New Guinea is in the mountains. These people did not come into contact with Westerners until the late 1930s, when some young Australian gold prospectors sort of stumbled across them. The first wheels those people ever saw were on airplanes. They helped the prospectors build the runways for those airplanes to land in their area.

All the troubles that we saw there as far as governance was concerned are typical of tribal cultures. I always had to remind myself and my staff and the people that came to visit us that these problems weren't a sign of failure. In fact, what they had accomplished was a remarkable success. If your grandfather had never seen an outsider before, had never seen a wheel before, and now you have gotten at least a partial college education and you are doing your best to run a government agency, then good for you. It's just amazing. I talked about this with the man who was the director of the PNG central bank. He said, "My grandparents did not know what money was, and here I am running the central bank" and he was doing a pretty darn good job, too. We had to keep that in mind. The governments of all three of these countries were democratically elected. They had parliaments. The parliaments were run in the Westminster fashion and parliamentary procedures were, in my opinion, often grossly abused. They hardly did anything in parliament except have votes of no confidence against the government. Too many of the politicians had joined the side that they thought would get elected, so they could get elected. Once they were in government, however, they were constantly plotting and planning to join others and destabilize the government. That was terribly frustrating, mostly for the Papua New Guineans and also for those of us who were trying to deal with them. I found the people, the ministers, the prime ministers, the other officials, head of the military and so on, quite interesting and cordial to deal with. I can't say that we were able to get lots of work done. On the other hand, we, the Americans, did not have much to offer either. These governments see foreign relations as a conduit for foreign aid, and we didn't have much to offer. We had removed all of our development aid from the Pacific countries. The only thing that I had to offer there, weirdly enough, was a sizable Peace Corps contingent and some military assistance, not equipment, but training. Also, the military have civil affairs projects through which we could provide some material goods. Once I got a ton of treated mosquito nets that I could send out to a group in very mosquitoey part of the country to try to protect their people from malaria, for example. I had no military attaché, but the attaché in Canberra was also accredited to us and he came there frequently and his office worked very well with us on these things.

I got myself slightly off on the wrong foot with the man who was the prime minister at the time that I had my confirmation hearings. One of the things we were taught in our training was how to deal with the press, how important it was to come up with good sound bites. I found I had a certain talent for that, but pithy statements, I learned, don't make you popular with everyone. When I was being interviewed by the senators, one of the senators asked me why there was so much crime in Port Moresby. I said something to the effect that, "Papua, New Guinea, like most other developing countries, has the problem of too many young men, too few jobs, too many guns and too much beer." I heard this guffaw in the audience behind me. I knew there were no Papua, New Guineans at the hearing, but the hearing also included Genta Hawkins Holmes, who was going out to be ambassador to Australia. Of course there were Australian press there because of Genta. Guess what? An Australian reporter thought that my line was great, up and put it into

an article. He said that Genta was really happy to go to Australia and that Ms. Karaer was happy to go to New Guinea, but doesn't have any illusions about what she's getting into, and then he quoted my sound bite. The poor DCM e-mailed me to report that he had heard that the prime minister was upset about what I said. I said, "Did I say something that wasn't true?" He said, "No." I said, "Well, we'll just have to take it like it is." Nothing came of it.

In fact, it turns out that the Prime Minister had much worse problems than young men with beer. Three days after I arrived in Papua New Guinea, the head of the Papua New Guinean military, which we had been helping to train, by the way, led a coup against the government. Now, he didn't want to become the head of government, he just wanted the prime minister of the moment to resign and for the parliament to choose a new prime minister. He was upset because the Prime Minister had hired a private British Security firm called Sandline International to deal with a long term rebellion on the island of Bougainville. Bougainville is part of PNG and the military was really being beaten up there. The Prime Minister claimed that Sandline had been employed only as advisers and trainers, but they were equipped with attack helicopters. The Australians and our military people agreed that it looked like they were planning to use this much heavier fire power against the Bougainvillians. Even worse, from the PNG general's point of view, the PM had used money in the government budget that was intended to support the PNG military to pay these mercenaries, who were Brits and South Africans. Both his authority to control the military and the money to equip his troops was being turned over to these foreigners. The PNG army wasn't the greatest military force in the world, but the government hadn't supported them properly either. The soldiers weren't paid regularly, nor were the troops on Bougainville fed regularly. Most of them had to depend on local people for their food.

The prime minister did resign in the end. He tried to get the Australians to bring in Australian military to put down the mutiny, but they refused. We were concerned that the mutiny might foment general public unrest, but, aside from some looting right around the military base and hoodlums showing off for the TV cameras, that didn't occur. Crowds did gather around the parliament building, which scared the lawmakers, but everyone went home quietly after the prime minister agreed to resign.

Q: You had just arrived there?

KARAER: Yes, three days before. One thing I learned from that is that in situations like this, it is necessary for Embassy management to strike a balance between keeping its personnel safe and finding out what is really going on. The advice we were giving the rest of the American community was to stay in their houses or offices, not to travel around town. The political officer had attended a briefing by the PNG general the day after the coup started, but the instinct of the rest of the staff was to stay hunkered down in the Embassy. We kept being told that gangs were gathering here and there and could be ready to start mob action. Well, after a day or so on television we kept seeing footage of people jumping up and down and trashing small trading shops, but it was always in the same part of town.

Also, you could see that while there were some soldiers with guns, they were sort of running down through their base towards the street, not out on the street. The police had stayed faithful to the government, and they were doing what they could to control the crowd in the street, but the

real worry was that the military would get the police to join them and then there would be even a greater problem. You could see on these television pictures that while some soldiers were trying to threaten the police with guns, their officers had their pistols out and were making the soldiers go back and stay well within the boundaries of the base. I thought, "Now wait a minute, this is not a South American military coup here, this is something different." Of course we had already protested very strongly to the government of Papua, New Guinea for bringing in the mercenaries, and the general had arrested the mercenaries and their leader. They had shipped the mercenaries out of the country right away. The Brit who was in charge was still being held in jail. They finally agreed to release him to the custody of the British High Commissioner who just lived down the street from me. I went to make my courtesy call on him in the middle of all this, and he said, “Would you like to come to dinner at my house and meet this guy?” I said, “Sure, but don’t expect me to be nice to him.”

I discussed my impressions with the DCM. True, we had to keep our people secure, but we, me, the DCM, the political officer had to do what we could to get information that’s not just second hand from the Australian Embassy, or the TV, so that we could make a real judgment for ourselves whether or not our citizens were insecure. I pointed out that while the Australians were saying, stay where you are, nobody is telling their people to leave town. They haven’t sent any transport planes to take their citizens out of here. After having collected any information we could, we decided that it was okay to just warn our people to try to stay off the streets and wait this thing out. We would let them know if we thought that it was necessary to leave the country. The coup presented no problem in the interior at all. This had nothing to do with those places, and that’s where most of our citizens were.

In the middle of all this, I was told that a courier was arriving at the airport in the middle of all this with a classified pouch. The GSO said, “But we can’t go and meet the plane. The roads to the airport are blocked and dangerous.” I said, “There must be more than one way to get to the airport, isn’t there?” I didn’t know. I first saw the map of this place when I got there. “Well, there is a back road, but we don’t know it very well.” “Well, don’t our drivers know it?” “Well, yes.” “The communicator and you go with the driver and meet the plane.” I was pretty sure that the rioting was confined to the main road, but was sitting there thinking I hope I don’t end up having them knocked over the head or something. They went and got the pouch, and I praised them for being such great heroes and everything. Nothing happened to them at all. It also showed that we weren’t cut off from the outside world at all.

In the end we ended up with a new prime minister. I argued very strongly that we continue our very small military assistance program with the military commander. Even though what he had done was not totally according to Hoyle, what he had done was very understandable. What the prime minister had done, import mercenaries, was even less democratic than what the commander had done.

Q: Just to get an idea how this works, did you get your political officer and others out sort of in the street to find out what was happening? How did you go about that?

KARAER: We stayed away from the areas where we knew rioting was going on. It would have been stupid and unnecessary to go into the middle of a crowd. We didn’t need to see those

people. They were dancing up and down for the television cameras and were burning Chinese shops. What we needed to do was probe the other areas of town and see whether other areas were also being attacked. It turned out no. Nobody was doing anything bad there. It was just the area near the military base where there was any violence. We had the political officer go to the meeting of parliament where the prime minister finally stood up and said, "Okay, I'll resign." We got the reporting from that.

Our relationship with the Australian embassy was a very good one. I really respected the high commissioner, and he was very generous with his time and his opinions. Other people on my staff cultivated acquaintances with their people. However, I found I had to warn my staff to remember that we have to have our opinions, too. Probably it's true that 90% of the time we're going to be absolutely in agreement with the Australians, but our interests here are not exactly the same as theirs. While we certainly don't want to get in their way, we want to also get information from the New Guineans about what's going on, as well as from the Australians, and there was a problem there. It was really comfortable to have a beer with an Australian and hear all about what they believed was going on in town. It was not quite as easy to get an appointment with and get the information out of a Papua New Guinean and figure out what side of the political equation he was on at that particular moment. But that, of course, was more interesting, too.

Q: What was the parliamentary structure? You're saying that once they got elected on a slate, they immediately became their own creature more or less.

KARAER: The constituencies were ethnic, language groups. So if you belonged to a group that was the biggest or one of the biggest ones in the area, then you could expect to get the votes of those people. But you had to give lots of presents as part of your election campaign. That's the way tribal leadership works.

Q: You were saying, once elected....

KARAER: Once elected these guys did not want to have another election until it was required by the constitution, because getting elected was an expensive undertaking. But because they were operating within a Westminster parliamentary system, there could be any number of votes of no confidence and, therefore, changes in who was the prime minister. The Prime Minister chose the ministers in the government, and a ministerial position is what everybody wanted. They wanted to have a ministership because ministers got lots of perks, and also, most ministries had chances at kickbacks as well. That was the game that was being played.

In these island countries there are many small political parties, so they almost always have a coalition government, and then the parliament chooses who will be the prime minister. Whoever garners enough votes in the parliament, regardless of party, gets to be prime minister, but then he proceeds to spend his entire incumbency fighting off no confidence votes. It was sort of a game.

PNG has important mineral deposits. Chevron was there exploring for and extracting oil. They also were trying to do a big gas contract. There was plenty of natural gas. There was an attempt to build a pipeline that would take this gas to markets in northern Australia for sale there because

there just wasn't enough industry in Papua New Guinea to use that amount of natural gas. There are gold mines there, and there's some copper also. Then there were certain much smaller, but still important, agro-industrial things like coffee. Even cattle was being raised in the northern part of New Guinea. That was a big business for some people. The infrastructure in the country was not good. There were fairly good roads in the northern part of the country, main highways to connect the major towns, but there was no highway connecting the very important highland areas in the center of the country with Port Moresby and its sea port. The failure to build a connecting highway had been a deliberate decision on the part of the government. Building such a highway would have been difficult and expensive, because the center of the island consists of razorback mountains. But the principal reason for not building the highway was because the people on the coast, who are ethnically different from the highlands people, didn't want all these highlanders to find it easy to come down there. The highlanders are a very aggressive people, and very self-confident. They have a real entrepreneurial streak in them, despite the fact that they hadn't been engaged in modern commerce for more than two or three generations. The coastal people just wanted to keep their area as highlander-free as possible. The policy also meant that the lowlands were fresh-vegetable-free to a great extent. The highlands are a perfect place to grow garden produce, but because there was only air transport from the highlands to Port Moresby, it was not competitive to bring things like tomatoes and lettuce from the highlands. Instead fresh produce came from Australia. An awful lot of stuff that really should have been produced in Papua New Guinea, for their own markets, was imported from Australia.

Q: How did some of the Port Moresby officials dictate the policy of the government? In other words, this supposedly was an election throughout Papua, New Guinea including the highlands, but did the Port Moresby people more or less run things?

KARAER: No. Prime Ministers have been elected from all over the country. Although, the man who was prime minister most of the time I was there actually was a mixed race man who was born and grew up in Port Moresby. He couldn't control politics unless he made common cause with leaders from other areas, otherwise they were going to form coalitions inside the parliament to get him out of there. In fact, they eventually did do that.

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I started a dialogue with the Department over appointing consular agents in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, because while the resident Americans that we knew and worked with there provided emergency help to Americans out of the goodness of their hearts, we thought it would really be much better if we had someone in each capital who had an official appointment. Before I left I was able to get an appointments for Keithie Saunders in Honiara, and I had requested an appointment for another businesswoman in Port Vila. The lady in Vanuatu, in case you ever go there, runs a wonderful restaurant called Jill's; her first name is Jill, and she serves American style goodies, hamburgers, hot dogs, tacos and it's really good stuff. The best French fries you'll ever have anywhere in the world.

Q: As a kid I read all of Jack London's stories about the area there and the ships. Did you have any sort of drifters, American drifters going off and living with the, I mean creating a family or just being nere-do-wells or was that all passed?

KARAER: My consular agent in Honiara in the Solomon Islands had a guy that just sort of became destitute there and didn't seem to have any desire to help himself. The local folks said, "Well, he can sleep in the jail. She thought, "Oh how can an American do that? Being more hard-hearted, I told her, "You watch it, or you're going to have the whole world coming to your doorstep to be fed." He came and he went. She helped him get some money and get a ticket and get out of there. No, there weren't many, because it's just so expensive to get there, I guess.

Q: Had Pidgin English disappeared by this time?

KARAER: New Guinea Pidgin is the lingua franca of the country. There is some English, German, local words and syntax, and Australian slang. The verb in New Guinea pidgin for "to break" is "bugger up." It's a perfectly respectable verb.

Q: Just like a Korean mechanic who told my wife when our car wasn't running in the middle of a little village in the middle of Korea, he worked for the army at one time, and he looked at the water pump and he said, "Your water pump is all f_cked up." He was right, it was f_cked up. Were you ever invited for "long pig?" A long pig being a human being.

KARAER: No, there is no more cannibalism in those countries anymore. As far as the local folks are concerned, it's not a joke to refer to that old custom. Although at a national day reception, the Fijian Ambassador surveyed the crowd of the good and great of Port Moresby, leaned over to me and said, "You know, my uncle was eaten here." His uncle had been one of the islander deacons who had been trained by the foreign missionaries to act as sort of the first wave into these unproselytized areas like New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The idea was that perhaps they would be more acceptable to the local people than the Europeans would be. He was one of the folks who bit the dust there, but that was the only reference I ever heard made to that part of their history by a South Pacific islander.

That doesn't mean that people aren't realistic about their history and their culture. Before coming to the islands, I had read a number of newspaper statements by Melanesian leaders about the Bougainville conflict to the effect that Melanesians should be allowed to resolve these conflicts without outside interference, that there was a "Melanesian way" to peacefully find a resolution. I asked a Papua New Guinea politician about that. He said, "Ambassador, the "Melanesian Way" to resolve conflicts is to hit the other guy over the head." Before I left Papua New Guinea, the Speaker of the PNG Parliament, who is a wonderful man, had gone on a trip to South Africa, where the UN was sponsoring a meeting on preservation of traditional cultures. He made a speech there, which was reported in the Port Moresby newspapers. He was brutally frank. He said something like, "We in Papua New Guinea understand the importance of preserving our culture. We're proud of our culture. But there are some things that were not good about the old culture and that nobody wants to preserve." He mentioned cannibalism. Then he said, "For example, if I stood before you today in my traditional costume, you would have me arrested for indecent exposure."

Q: Do they wear those penal gourds?

KARAER: They do. I came across that when I made that trip up to the northwest coast. When my husband and I got off the little plane, there was a dancing group to meet us arranged by the local government authority. These were the most nude of all of the dancers that we had seen so far. These guys were wearing these long, curly gourds on their prized possessions. I had read about this custom, of course, but stupid me, I had assumed that the goal was for some kind of modesty, but of course it's not. As soon as I saw them dancing around, I knew that it was simply an enhancement.

End of reader