

Insider's story: how Papua New Guinea got its flag

Hal Holman OAM



It was 1973 when Lisle Newby, the Director of Information and Extension Services, called me out of the blue. I was asked to contact the office of the PNG House of Assembly to discuss designs for a national crest and flag that would represent the new country, soon to be self-governing. I was told I would have to enlist the assistance of my PNG staff in the Department's art section. Together we were to come up with a series of designs

to submit to the Committee for Constitutional Development.

The Committee was travelling through PNG to discuss the future Constitution. The flag and crest were just two of many matters they had to resolve. We were given a tight deadline to produce a folio of ideas and, when the Committee arrived at Lae during their circuit, we were invited to present our suggestions. With my second-in-charge, Esau Reuben, I flew across the Owen Stanley range from Port Moresby and booked into the Lae hotel.

The job was difficult because none of our PNG staff was a designer. Nevertheless they deserved to be given the chance to come up with something and several staff proposals for flag and crest emerged. These were mounted and framed to maximize their chances of acceptance.

I refrained from producing a piece of finished artwork because of Newby's directive not to proffer my own designs. Instead, I selected a series of cut-outs: instantly interchangeable images (bird of paradise, stars, union jack etc) together with variations of background stripes and colours that could be adhered to a felt board.

Esau and I were to strut our stuff at 10 am in the morning. Sweating in Lae's sauna heat, we sat on hard benches outside the conference room before being practically snap-frozen when the call came to enter the air-conditioned inner sanctum.

The Committee comprised all Papua New Guineans but for one Caucasian, John Middleton OBE. The chairman was Paulus Arek, Minister for Information. Paulus knew me well as some time earlier we had established that during the war I had overnighted in his village with my unit prior to a confrontation with the Japanese at Buna. At that time Paulus was just a boy, and he had warned us not to sleep under the coconut palms for fear of falling nuts. He spoke good English as well as *tok ples* (his local language) and Pidgin English. But he did not speak the Papuan language Motu.

On the Committee were some New Guineans who spoke no English. Paulus spoke in English and in Pidgin so the New Guinean members could

understand. He announced that Esau and I had been sent from Port Moresby on the authority of the House of Assembly and that we would present designs for the flag and the crest. He then turned to us and asked us to begin.

"I feel we should ask Mr Esau Reuben, who is a Papuan, to speak first. Mr Reuben, so that we can all understand, could you please address the meeting in Pidgin English?"

Esau, who had been buoyant and smiling, froze. There was an embarrassing silence while he collected his wits.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "I can't speak Pidgin English."

"Well in that case we will have to ask Mr Holman to address the Committee," said Paulus. "Can you speak Pidgin, Mr Holman?" He knew I did.

"Certainly, Mr Chairman."

"Then let's get on with it, please proceed."

"Thank you, Mr Chairman." And without further ado I began to explain this complicated issue in Pidgin. In spite of my efforts to wax eloquent, the members sat stony-faced. They were obviously not impressed with our designs. Finally Esau and I were sent from the conference room while the Committee deliberated. The suspense was awful. Esau was devastated. He was a proud Papuan and this blow to his ego was unbearable. There had always been a rift between us and the gap had just widened to a canyon.

When we were called back, Paulus Arek expressed regret that the Committee had rejected all submissions.

"Mr Holman, this Committee will sit again in Lae for the last time tomorrow morning. Perhaps you can find time before then to come up with something else before we depart."

After some verbal exchange, it was clear the preferred image would be a bird of paradise. Then the meeting ended. We were politely ushered out and the door closed behind us.

Fortunately I had brought brushes and art equipment from Moresby.

"That's the end of any thought we may have had to relax this evening," I said to Esau. "I don't think they would take too kindly to blank sheets of paper in the morning – we'd better come up with something good!"

Secretly I was pleased, for it meant I now had a chance to submit a design of my own, which previously Newby had disallowed. It was dawn when I finally laid down my paintbrush. Later Esau joined me in the dining room. He looked worn out, his eyes were bloodshot and puffy.

"It's been a rough night for you, too, Esau," I said, and he nodded and picked up the menu. I tried to start a conversation but, meeting with silence, gave up.

After breakfast I said to Esau that that we should meet outside the conference room at nine o'clock. He nodded and we parted. I spent the last half hour cleaning up my design and then headed for the conference room. Esau was sitting on the bench outside the door. "Hi!" I said with forced brightness. "All ready?" He nodded. Then I realised he was empty-handed. "Have you left your work in your room, Esau?"

"I couldn't think of anything," he said angrily.

"Not to worry, I've got something here to show them, so at least they can't complain. Besides, I can ask for more time to work on it if it's not to their liking."

Then the door opened and we were called in. The members, shuffling and signing papers, did not look up for what seemed like an eternity. I fumbled with the catch of my briefcase and removed my work. At last Paulus spoke.

"You have some new work to show us, Mr Holman?"

"Yes, Mr Chairman."

"You may show it to us then."

After a short preamble I revealed the design of the crest. A murmur of approval sounded around the table. John Guise jumped to his feet. "Gentlemen, that's it! That's the crest our country needs!"

With that he marched up to the illustration and saluted. The design had the unanimous approval of the Committee.



It was time for the flag. I unrolled the felt design kit I'd put together. Against a background rectangle, I applied each alternative design symbol. With the lively participation of the Committee, the flag reached its first approval. All was well, and we were ushered out with thanks.

This was where the design for the flag emerged. But it was a politically sensitive issue. The design found its way to Moresby and – after a public competition – evolved into its present, modified form.

Several people over the years have spoken to Esau Reuben about the flag and the crest. He claims the Committee designed the crest and he states the flag was designed by Susan Kareke of Yule Island. As late as 2005 he claimed he participated in the design of both crest and flag. He had nothing to do with either.

Lisle Newby, the Director of the Department of Information, was so zealous in his dedication to exalt the feats performed by 'local officers' (a euphemism for PNG staff), that only their notable feats were considered as newsworthy.

Upon returning to Port Moresby, I took stock. The finished artwork for the crest had not been presented to Parliament. It was not in the Art Section. It was missing. An Admin Officer confided, "The artwork is shoved behind the Director's filing cabinet. I saw it there a week ago." When I asked Newby for it from, he was taken aback. But the new crest was finally submitted to Parliament and published in the Government Gazette.

When the Committee for Constitutional Development accepted my design, I contacted Jim Leigh, head of DIES broadcasting.

"Have I ever got a news item for you?" I announced.

"Pray, do tell, father," he said, swivelling his chair around to face me.

"My design for the PNG crest has been approved — it's official."

"Sorry, father, hadn't heard. I've been flat out on other matters and haven't had a chance to sort the mail."

"I thought perhaps you might like to use it in the news."

"Well, that all depends, Ha!" He avoided my gaze.

"Depends on what?"

"Was a local involved in the design?"

"No. They were all rejected at the meeting. But my design was passed unanimously by the Committee."

Swivelling his chair away from me he said, "I can't use it unless a Papua New Guinean was involved. Sorry!"

It was pointed out to me it would be improper for an expatriate to be instrumental in the design of the PNG flag. Thereafter the flag design was turned into a colouring competition. Black and white traced line drawings of my 'test flag' (as they called it) with the Southern Cross and the stylised bird of paradise were printed.



These outline copies were circulated throughout PNG and a schoolgirl named Susan Kareke, a student on Yule Island in the Gulf of Papua, was announced as the winner of the PNG flag colouring-in competition. To rub salt into the wound, I was ordered by Newby to photograph the girl raising the flag, as her design on our Department's flagpole in 1971. For this she was awarded the OBE.

But this was only the beginning of the story. Nearly thirty years later there was a denouement.

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Letters to the Editor
PNG Post Courier

I read with interest Ms Susan Huhune's claim to the flag of PNG. I was a member of the Constitutional Committee of the second House of Assembly that chose the flag, and the following comments may be of interest.

On our first tour of the country the Committee was asked to gather flag designs from the people. However, in spite of extensive advertising, we found little enthusiasm for a new flag and only a few designs were submitted, none of which were regarded as suitable for a national emblem.

The Australian Government then suggested to the Committee that we have a flag designed and take it on our next tour to get the people's comment. Actually the question changed from 'Do you want a flag?' to 'Do you want this flag'.

This did cause considerable debate and certainly far more interest. When a sub-committee (of which I was not a member) went to Yule Island, they brought back an adaption of this flag which everyone thought very suitable.

The original 'test' flag was actually designed by a Government artist Mr Hal Holman in conjunction with the Committee.

It was three vertical bars of green with a gold bird of paradise, gold and blue, with the Southern Cross.

A schoolgirl, Susan, had drawn a diagonal line across the test flag and reduced the colours to two, red and black.

She explained she did not like the colours and layout of the original flag as they were not traditional.

Much more traditional and festive was red and black and the diagonal was also more traditional, she thought.

Anyway, the Committee agreed and the flag was recommended and eventually accepted as our national emblem.

John Middleton OBE

From 'The Phoenix Rises Eternal', an unpublished memoir by Haldane Sinclair Holman OAM