

**PART ONE**

Bougainville Island, Territory of New Guinea

1943

*Death of a  
Coast Watcher*

*Sunday 21 February 1943. Bougainville.* Half an hour after sunrise, a blend of sweat and gore had already pasted the prisoner's shirt and shorts to his skin. The young Caucasian barefoot and gaunt; not much taller than the squat Japanese guard who forced him to his knees. Hugh Rand spat a bubble of blood onto the sand. Strange—it didn't absorb. How long would it take to dry? He drooled another globule and tried to hit the first; missed. Sand greyish here, darker than Sydney beaches.

Rand's elbows were roped hard against his waist and pulled back towards his kidneys to ensure torment as well as restraint. The rope gnawed at skin and muscles, tried to dislocate shoulders. A roundish burn on his forehead, like a Hindu *tilak* dot; blood from his scalp matted his blonde hair and beard into clumps; his left cheek puffed out blue within the serrated oval of a human bite. His testicles ached from kicks. Three fingernails ripped from each hand; a stab-wound festered in his left palm. Several teeth smashed out with a rattan club. Three broken ribs, two in front and one behind, grated and agonised at his most feeble movement. His back and buttocks shrieked from rattan thrashings and the branding iron; still a whiff of barbecued pork. He refused to even murmur against pain that should have made him scream.

Four minutes later, Hugh Rand's cheeks stung from slaps delivered by a village woman. Her wad of fresh spittle slid down his forehead and clung

to his right eyebrow. An officer had permitted her and a teenage girl to approach the captive at the end of the few minutes the Japanese had given him to ruminate before they masked him with a rag that stank of coconut oil. He had spent most of that time meditating on his embryonic son, David; but in another more conscious stream of thought, about fear and courage, he wondered why he was unafraid. Perhaps because he could no longer exploit the adrenalin of fear to steel him for flight or fight, both impossible for a hogtied man almost beaten to death. In a passive way, perhaps he was brave in his calm wait for death, but he had always associated bravery with an intelligent choice of danger when relative safety was an option. No choice now, so probably neither brave nor cowardly; detached, more like it.

Before the Japanese captured him he killed two of their hunting hounds and one soldier with no time to wonder if he should fight or flee, or both. In the first skirmish he fought because he was inclined to do so, and fled because he won; in the second he fought on impulse, lost the fight and could not choose to flee. No considered choices in either case, therefore no bravery? After his capture he had no choice as to whether or not the Japanese would torture him. He had behaved well under torment, but because neither the killings nor the torture were choices he would not claim courage.

Rand was sure the Japanese thought him brave, but to him their concept of courage did not include choice and was therefore less refined than his. In their naivety, they were about to behead him with honour rather than shoot or bayonet him as a pig, their routine ways of killing prisoners who, unlike him, had surrendered, or had wilted under torture, or both. Cowards, to the Knights of Bushido. If they wanted to turn him into a bogus hero in Australia and perhaps Japan, let them behead him. They might have decided to lop his head as a warrior but to present the method as a gesture of honour for courage was spurious, delusional; a cultural cloak for ritualised murder as theatre; an entertaining break from routine sadism.

No, he did not think himself courageous, just defiant. How about 'dignified' as he faced death, a few minutes away? In his current hell, as with a victim of cancer or some other terminal disease, dignity was a display of self-control, of emotional and intellectual power, when taking the consequences of not being able to choose or spurn safety, or opt for life over death.

To make the victim contemplate separation of head from body was the ultimate assault on dignity, a ploy to taunt the victim, to make him and the audience focus more on his total loss of choice than his looming loss of life. Would the Japanese bury his head and body together or apart, or bury the body and cast the head into the sea, or vice versa? Or cast both into the

sea, in the same place; or far apart, to compound the indignity of dismemberment?

Now was no time to indulge in semantics and scrambled philosophy, or speculation about the disposal of his body, and no time to explore courage or dignity in military and other contexts, or to assess the motivation and other forces acting on people who were said to be brave or dignified. His killers and the gallery could label him as they saw fit. No matter. They would see his defiance and feel his scorn, and would know he could still influence the script.

The woman slapped Rand out of his musing; spat, scolded and sneered; showed him something in her cupped hand and something about the girl that she needed to show him; grabbed the girl's elbow and hauled her back to the rear of the audience.

The guard masked Rand. He fought to stay on his knees but had to sink his backside onto bare heels to prevent a forward topple. Rested his beard on his chest, both pasted with vomit and blood. Fifty Japanese soldiers jeered at his assault by a black woman and his surrender to gravity and pain; when an officer chided them they shuffled and calmed. A hundred Bougainvilleans murmured. Soldiers silent. Rand listened to the wash of the sea and tasted the salt in his blood and in the air. A plane took off from the airfield nearby. Sounded like a Zero.

To his left, Rand heard an officer's knee-boots stomp and squeak to his side. He focused on the wheeze of his own breath; remembered the snub nose of his mother's bulldog slavering at a bone. Smelled leather and alien sweat beside him, through the stink of his own body—in this dreadful humidity the main ingredient in a soup that simmered harder as the sun rose higher.

Someone else wrote this part of the script. Maybe not. He had accepted the assignment even though his minders in Townsville warned him how it might end. Perhaps he alone had anticipated and created this finale, led himself and the other players to it step by step, always the flexible playwright and director.

“If the Japs get you, keep away from their cutlery,” Rand's estranged father, a damaged veteran of the Great War, had joked during a rare meeting just before the Bougainville posting. Rand said he would be safe in the navy.

He heard a sword scrape from its scabbard. For three seconds the blade vibrated and sang at a lowering pitch as it dipped on the practice swing to the juncture of his C4 and C5 vertebrae; went dead when it tasted his skin for an instant, light as the wing of a passing butterfly. Sword as tuning fork, heart as metronome. The butcher splashed water. Blade lubricant? New Irishmen would wet knives to slaughter pigs.

Rand calm, shudderless. With chin still heavy on chest he conquered agony and rose to kneel in triumph, pleased that his groin muscles were too cramped with pain for him to piss, his bowels too vacant to erupt.

His mother, much too young, struggled to reach him through fog; tried to promise she would take care of David, but could only sigh and brush her son's cheek with a forefinger before the fog sucked her back in. He dwelt on her touch in a futile attempt to override what the village woman had said to him and shown him after she smacked his cheeks and spat on his face.

Why was this woman a turncoat? Wait. No, impossible. Courageous? Brilliant? Yes, yes; both. Of course. Under his inspiration, at great risk to herself, she had performed a perfect act of cunning in public to fool the Japanese into thinking she hated him when they had suspected the opposite. Now they would ignore her and the girl; his son would be safe.

The Zero now the hum of bee on the horizon he could not see. Rand the pilot on a routine hunt in his mobile *axis mundi*. Food in the cockpit for a mid-morning snack. Rice?

The officer's boots creaked as he raised the sword and sucked in air. Rand held his breath and locked his sphincter. Tried to see David in the

cradled arms of his own mother in Australia; but the beloved village woman's fake sneer would not let him. So brilliant, so loyal.

The butterfly returned as a wasp and the sneer span into oblivion.

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