

On the protest frontline

One of the highlights of award-winning Joseph Ealedona's journalism career was while he was a student covering a protest at the French Embassy in 1987 in support of Kanak independence.

By JOSEPH MOROKANA

A BOUGAINVILLE radio documentary which included the voices of rebel leaders Francis Ona and Sam Kauona led to National Broadcasting Corporation journalist Joseph Ealedona winning the 1993 Pacific Radio Journalist of the Year award. But for Ealedona, one of the major highlights of his journalism career was while he was a student covering a protest at the French Embassy in 1987 in support of Kanak independence from French rule in New Caledonia.

Together with a Tongan, Nanise Fifita, now a prominent journalist in Tonga, he was in the journalistic 'frontline'. They were the only two students on the electronic media course at the University of Papua New Guinea and were doing television coverage of the protest. Only Ealedona was allowed to interview the French ambassador at this time. The protest ended with clashes between the police and the students and a subsequent battle in days that followed at the university's Waigani campus.

'I remembered Powes Parkop and Ben Micah shouting at me while being dumped in a police vehicle to tell the world what was going on,' he recalls. To him, this event showed what journalism was all about. He realised that studying journalism could not alone make a journalist. He learned that journalism is being where the action is plus 'real guts and a burning desire to bring out the truth'.

About his award, he says: 'I was very privileged in winning the best radio journalist award. And I think I deserved it, because I often risked my life covering the Bougainville crisis since 1989 at Arawa.'

Ealedona says that becoming a journalist was his best experience in life —

not a journalist sitting in an office expecting stories to fall into his lap, but one who goes out and gets stories against all odds.

Ealedona went to high school in his home province of Milne Bay and then to Aiyura National High School near Goroka. While at Aiyura, he concentrated on studying science. He wanted to become a pilot with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force.

The years 1983-84 shaped Ealedona's future. He was very much in love with a beautiful young woman. She warned him not to join the force or their relationship would be over. He took her words seriously. They got married and Ealedona is now a journalist.

In 1985, Ealedona applied to do journalism at University of PNG but he was not accepted. He ended up at the Madang Paramedical College studying health extension courses. He kept in contact with the then journalism lecturer, David Ingram, and in 1986, he was finally successful in getting into UPNG's journalism school. Journalism training at the university during 1986-87 was still in the age of using old typewriters, cutting and pasting up *Uni Tavur* and many other 'exciting' things.

Ealedona failed his shorthand because it was held from 4-5 pm on the days he was needed at the training oval — he was playing for the University premier soccer team. Since his childhood days, he had this dream of playing for the university premier team and no shorthand classes would stop him from achieving his ambition.

Ealedona played a significant role in covering the Bougainville conflict at the height of the troubles in 1989, from Kieta and Arawa. He had been entrusted by his superiors to cover such a complex conflict to report the real situation, being fair and not biased towards either the rebels or the security forces. His experience on Bougainville helped him develop his skill of being unbiased, double checking information and never releasing information that was hearsay.

'Being on Bougainville was a plus for me,' he says.

He remembers the day when NBC was broadcasting news flashes, that Francis Ona had died. A strategic and deliberate piece of Government propaganda — and all the media outlets fell for it with newspapers declaring FRANCIS ONA IS DEAD. He says his eyes nearly 'fell out'. He was the man on the ground covering the Bougainville conflict for the NBC and not even the editor had the courtesy to call him to double check. He was in a risky situation and little did the editor realise that he was putting his reporter's life at risk.

Ealedona rang Port Moresby to find out what was going on. Through his efforts he had to convince his superiors that Ona was alive. He ran stories to say Ona was 'well and truly alive'.

Ealedona says that the pressing need for journalists today is to report with

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integrity and without bias. They should report with benefit for the public in mind — and not just another report to please one party with the reporter having some vested interest. He believes that journalism is a profession, and that a journalist must ensure to keep up professionalism.

He remembers reporting on the controversial Luke Lukas case. He was the only journalist allowed into closed door meetings between senior state lawyers who wanted to remove Lukas as Justice Secretary.

Ealedona is one of the few privileged journalists who have travelled the

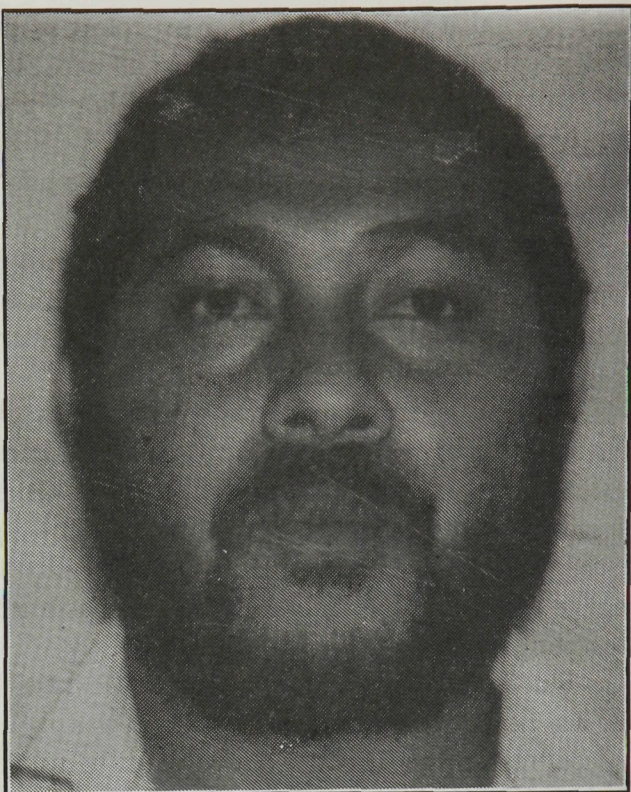
length and breadth of the Pacific with an attachment to the Pacific News (Pacnews) service. This enabled him to know more about the region.

Another event he will always remember, he says, was the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Cyprus. He had the privilege of reporting straight from the closed door meeting — several of them stories being a world scoop.

Until the general election in June, Ealedona was on secondment to the Constitutional Review Commission, which was reviewing the laws of this country and setting the course for the year 2002 and beyond. He says his ambition is to be more knowledgeable on a wide range of issues and this makes a good journalist.

His advice to all up-and-coming journalists is to be 'true to yourselves and to those around you — this will show in your writing'.

Ealedona has two young children, both boys, and his wife comes from Western Solomons. In 1994, they went to the Solomon Islands for a break. They took a flight up to the Western Solomons and went into 'hiding'. The problem was that the PNG High Commission in Honiara thought that he had sneaked into Bougainville.



Ealedona ... scoops from Cyprus.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Gabriel Dusava raised concern with the NBC authorities but it was a storm in a teacup.

During the week at the border between the Solomon Islands and Bougainville, he spoke to the people who were feeling the effects of the Bougainville crisis and its spillover into the Solomons and watching the Bougainville coastline under cover of darkness.

□ *Joseph Morokana worked for the National Broadcasting Corporation in Bougainville as a technician. This article was written on a practical reporting assignment as a first-year journalism student at UPNG.*



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