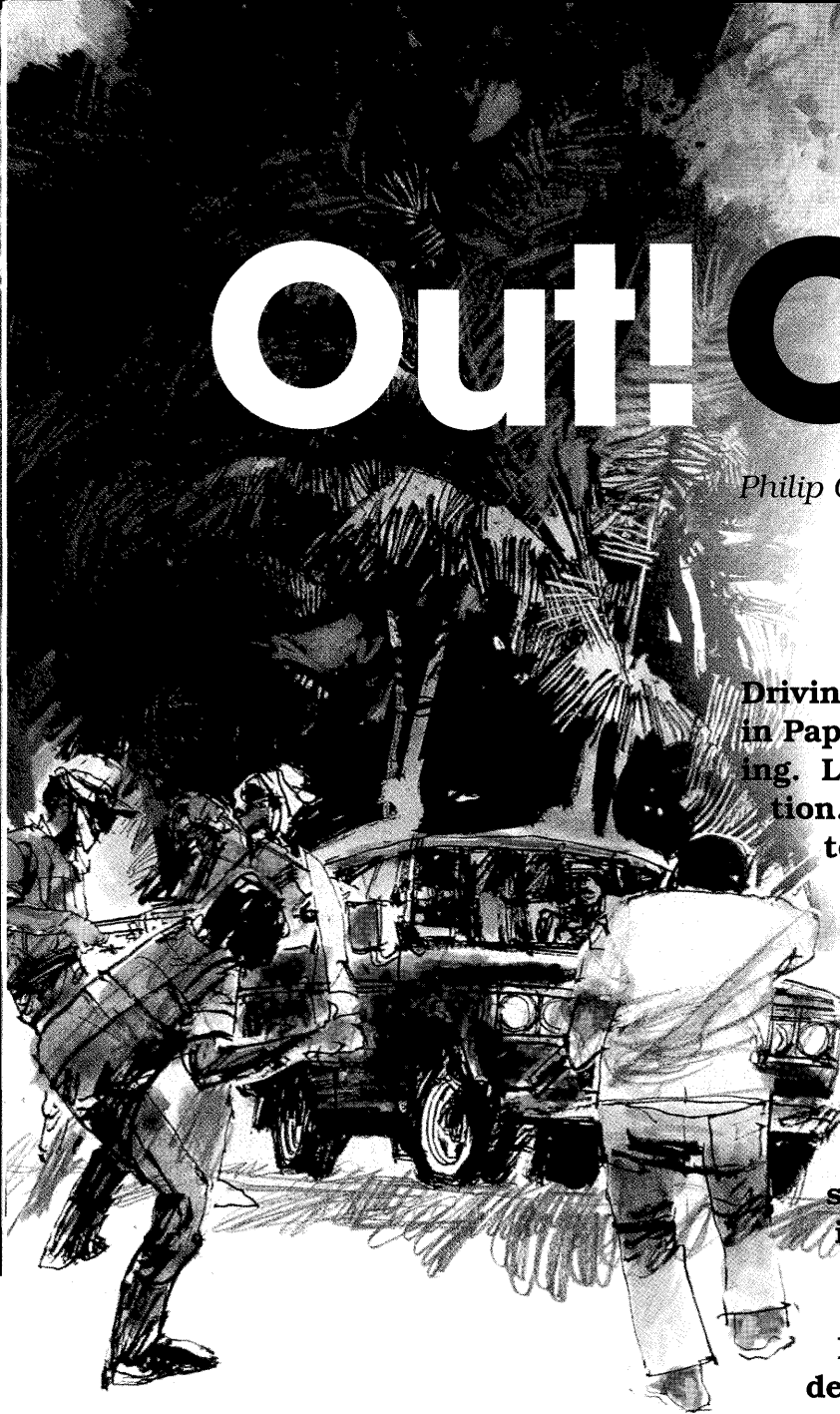


Out! Out!

Philip Gibbs SVD



Driving on the Highlands Highway in Papua New Guinea is never boring. Last Thursday was no exception. I was off on an 8-hour trip to Mendi, to film the final vow ceremony of some national Sisters. For the first leg of the journey, I accepted a ride with Fr. Valentine in his Suzuki 4WD. It was a pleasant sunny day, but we almost forgot about the beautiful mountain scenery, engrossed as we were in discussing ways of making a video that would be attractive to young people and help them to reflect more deeply on their lives.

We were negotiating a particularly bad patch of road, when all of a sudden our tranquillity was shattered! Five men ran out from the long grass at the roadside and stood in the middle of the road pointing guns straight at us. Valentine had to make an instant decision—to keep going, with the likelihood of being shot at from close range, or to stop. He stopped! Two men, wearing caps, their faces half covered with cloth—like Al Qaeda fighters—ran to our car, brandishing “bush knives,” sword-like weapons some 60cm long. One started slamming a rock against my passenger window, ordering me to open or else. Fearing that the window would surely be smashed by a further blow, I lowered the glass partway only to have him thrust the bush knife inside, stabbing at the car seat near my shoulder while yelling, “Out! Out!”

Neither of us obeyed the command. The car gave us a margin of safety.

Trying to stay calm, I began to bargain: “Wait, we’ll give you money!” The bush knife swung again just missing my neck. I reached for my bag and took out my wallet, exposing the money inside. The men continued to shout for us to get out. The two in front came closer, holding guns pointed straight

at the windscreen. Home-made shotguns appear like toys, but they can be as deadly as any factory-made weapon. The man on Fr. Valentine's side was getting quite agitated and Valentine was trying to hold his arm as he swung wildly with the knife. The one on my side took my wallet and then tried to take my travel bag as well. I fought to hold on to it as it contained other valuables like my glasses and my special digital minidisk tape recorder and microphone. He grabbed my tape-recorder and microphone and pulled them out through the window. Then as quickly as they had appeared the men ran off into the long grass. We checked the car for damage and then continued on our journey, stopping oncoming motorists and telling them to be careful as there were "raskols" on the road.

Sadly, such incidents are not uncommon in Papua New Guinea today. Most missionaries have to face similar experiences. This was the second time in twelve months that I had been "held up." On a previous occasion it was with a factory-made shotgun six inches from my face. Somehow that time I found a way to put old rugby football skills into action and managed to get my assailant to the ground and wrest the weapon from him. This time it was different. I lost my valuable tape recorder, but at least no one got hurt.

Last year the raskols in Lae town killed Fr. Hubert Hoffman CMM. They shot him in the head and took the K45 he was carrying. Only a few months before, Fr. Fabian Thom OFM was shot and killed as he lay in bed. In his homily at the funeral, the Apostolic Nuncio, declared that "Papua New Guinea's claim to being a Christian country is getting weaker every day."

Such banditry is neither practiced nor condoned by the majority of the population. People in cities like Port Moresby retire to their houses at night, locked behind bars and razor wire topped fences. After Fr. Valentine dropped me off at Kundiawa, I took a public bus to Mount Hagen. Some of the passengers recognized me, and when I told them of my misfortune on the road, they immediately took up a collection to pay my bus fare! That is an indication of the other side of life here. There were murmurs of "what is the country coming to . . . missionaries come to help us and these raskols threaten them and steal from

them!" I believe most people are genuinely ashamed and saddened that such violence is becoming more and more common.

What causes young men to turn to crime? Is it because they have been educated to expect a job and wages only to find themselves in the ranks of the unemployed? Is it the example of violence and crime seen so often in videos shown in the village? Is it a way of asserting one's manhood in a society that has abandoned initiation rites, and where corruption is rife up to the highest levels? Theories abound. Solutions are few. Social indicators point to a continuing decline in living standards in Papua New Guinea. The economy is in a state of crisis with the currency losing value and the prices ever on the increase. The police and armed forces are on the verge of mutiny; educational and health services are in deep trouble. This is the situation in which missionaries are asked to preach the "Good News." What is the good news for an unemployed alienated young man with nothing to do and all day to do it?

After three bus transfers and seven hours of bumpy riding, I arrived in Mendi for the celebration. Fortunately I had had the foresight to leave my video camera in a safe place in Mount Hagen, so I was able to recover it and film the beautiful ceremony of the six national Sisters making their final vows. Without the tape recorder, the interviews will have to wait for another time. ♦

