



# PX 891 FROM WAPENAMANDA

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I had a busy teaching schedule in the capital so I decided to take the Dash 8 flight out of Wapenamanda, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, for Moresby. I had read about the F28s having servicing problems. The Dash 8s were relatively new, so surely there would be no problem. At least that was my reasoning.

In an effort to get to the airstrip in plenty of time my driver and I left Wabag before the early morning mists had cleared. It had been raining all night and there were many slips on the road, but none bad enough to block the traffic. Near Birip, however, the road was blocked by a group of young men armed with bush knives claiming to have cleared the road and demanding K5 (about three dollars) from all vehicles. My driver managed to get through after paying K2; the car behind us was not so lucky.





The aircraft arrived early—surely a good sign. Soon it was parked in front of the Enga Air Niugini Office at Wapenamanda—consisting of the back of a utility vehicle driven onto the tarmac. After much pushing and shoving, our bags were weighed and loaded onto the back of the utility and we waited behind the rusty barbed wire fence until the very loud and aggressive groups of “security” decided it was time to let us through.

It was peaceful on board. I was in seat 1A, an ideal seat from which to watch the action. Everything seemed ready to go until the pilot requested the manifest showing the list of passengers. The manager, with all the confusion on the ground, hadn't quite got around to that, so with the help of the flight attendant, he began “from scratch” the laborious task of transferring names from the ticket coupons to the manifest.

Twenty minutes later, just as the manifest was completed, the pilot announced that clouds had begun to move in across the flight path and that we might as well leave the aircraft and wait out on the tarmac. With lots of

moans and groans the aircraft was soon vacated of all its passengers except a very elderly man who had to be half-carried onto the aircraft in the first place.

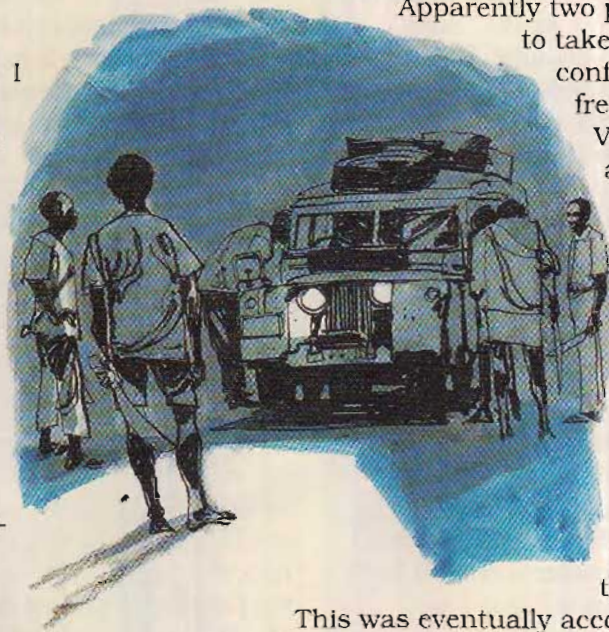
By 11:30 a.m. the clouds began to disperse and we all boarded the Dash 8. However, when the assistant manager counted the heads in the aircraft, there were two extras!

Apparently two people had decided to take advantage of the confusion and get a free trip to Moresby.

Voices got louder and louder with accusations and counter accusations as to who were the free-loaders. Eventually the captain instructed us all to leave the aircraft, including the old *lapun* man, and to reboard one by one with our tickets in hand.

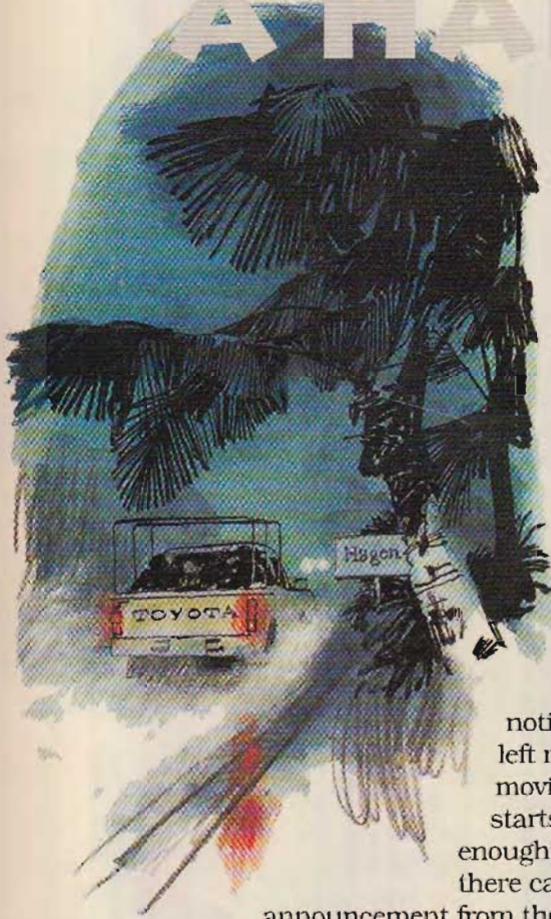
This was eventually accomplished with even more groaning and moaning.

Finally we were on board and the flight attendant was instructing us on how to inflate the life jackets. There is not much water between Wapenamanda and Moresby, but I suppose





# A HAIR-RAISING RIDE



the safety precaution is necessary. One of the plane's motors was running. But now I

noticed that the left motor was moving in fits and starts. Sure enough! Before long there came another

announcement from the captain. He was very apologetic. He was unable to start the left motor. We should all leave the aircraft again and await further instructions. Quite audible at this stage were the moaning and groaning interspersed with comments about the "land of the unexpected."

After a half-hour on the tarmac we were told that mechanics were coming from Moresby and that the flight would not be going that day. The Air Niugini manager would find some vehicles to bus us the 70 km over the Hagen Range to Kagamuga where we would surely find space on the afternoon F28 flight out of Hagen.

We waited and no buses appeared. With four other passengers I jumped on the back of a pickup to commence a hair-raising ride to Hagen. Ever so often one of the passengers would call to the driver to hurry as we were trying to catch a plane. The driver took the

reminder seriously and I experienced my fastest trip ever over the Hagen Range. My companions were a colorful lot: a policeman, two high school headmasters and a business woman. Jose was trying to get to Moresby for an appointment with the eye specialist. The teachers were to get money for their schools. Another teacher was going to Moresby to try to get back on the payroll. (It is a pity so many teachers feel they have to spend hundreds of kina to go to Moresby to get their pay! They say it is the only method that works.)

Over the Hagen Range it rained and hailed and we were a fine bunch of bedraggled humanity by the time we reached Hagen. I remembered my coat in my bag, still on the Dash 8. The manager assured us that our bags would be brought to Hagen. I was wishing I had mine with me. We stood at the counter shivering and dripping wet with puddles of water around our feet. The young woman at the desk was very polite but she informed us that the afternoon flight to Moresby was full. She would put us on the waiting list.

We waited for news of the flight. It would have been nice to have a toilet available, but both toilets at the Kagamuga terminal had notices saying "Toilet blocked. Do not use." I'm not sure what one does in emergencies. The Hagen flight was delayed an hour, and then came the announcement that because of a mechanical fault the aircraft had returned to Moresby and would not be coming to Hagen that day. All passengers should go away and report back at 7:30 the next morning!



There were very audible groans, especially from the thirty-four passengers who had by now arrived on buses from Wapenamanda. What were we to do? It was cold and wet and getting dark and Air Niugini was not going to put us up for the night. After some time the manager sent a message that we should all return to Wabag and wait for the mechanics to arrive sometime the next day. After the Dash 8 in Wapenamanda was repaired we would be flown to Moresby.

Many of the passengers accepted their fate and waited for transport to take them on the two-hour drive back at night over the Hagen Range to Wapenamanda and Wabag. It was all a bit much for some of us. I decided to stay in Hagen and try my luck on the waiting list out of Hagen the next day. The manager was very helpful and I was able to get out to Moresby on the first flight. I never heard any more about the fate of PX 891 out of Wapenamanda! ♦



# FIRST FLIGHT