

# What Would Martha Do? Confessions of a Hypochondriac in the Field

Michael Main

Like many others in the profession, I came to anthropology mid-career and sideways. First came geology and the mining industry, followed by contaminated land and groundwater environmental consulting. At the University of Melbourne, I was assigned to Martha because the research that I wanted to do was about the anthropology of risk. Just to be clear, I was not interested in anthropology as risk, but in the ways that anthropology could reveal the ways in which people perceived risk. Anthropologists, as I at the time was blissfully unaware, tend to embody a perception of risk that was not within the realm of my own experience—to say the least. I was interested in the risk to human health of pollution from the Ok Tedi mine in the Middle Fly and the ways that risk was being perceived culturally by landowners along the river. Papua New Guinea (PNG), mining, pollution, ethnography and Martha Macintyre—my destiny was sealed.

I want to provide some background about my professional training in the corporate world at the time I met Martha because it related to risk. The corporate concept of risk had been profoundly shaped by the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989. This disaster resulted in ExxonMobil quickly becoming the most risk-averse corporation on the planet. Over the next decade or so, ExxonMobil's risk-aversion culture was adopted by corporations in many parts of the world. It certainly was in Australia—right now, as we speak, there are people sitting in corporate offices

enduring the requisite pre-meeting safety tip and raising their hands to cite ‘paper cuts’ as a potential work-related risk for the office environment. Prior to meeting Martha, this was the perception of risk that I had had drummed into me during my career.

I had been to PNG only once, when assigned to manage a small team of archaeologists working on the collection of cultural heritage data for the nascent PNG Liquefied Natural Gas (PNG LNG) project at Komo. Prior to being sent to PNG, ExxonMobil’s risk-aversion machine kicked into high gear. We were given training courses in how to prepare for every worst nightmare that could be encountered by an organisation that embodies such a deep fear of paper cuts. We had satellite phones and requirements to call in by a specific time every day, just so that the office would know that we were still alive. We were required to report every potential incident, every bug bite, every time we forgot to wear our cut-proof Kevlar gloves and received, horror of horrors, a cut that actually occurred ex-bureau. We were given a list of things to include in our first aid kits, which had to be compulsorily carried on our person during all our fieldwork activities. The list was so long that it tipped me over into excess luggage and included a special bag in which to place body parts. However, it was never explained to me if the bag was intended for my own body parts or those of someone else who forgot to wear their Kevlar gloves that day.

Above all else, we were trained and told never ever under any circumstances to ever contract malaria. For anyone who ever got malaria on that project, the entire global corporation knew about it within minutes. We were shown films that taught us what the female anopheles mosquito looked like, how it behaved, how it transmitted the parasite, what to wear and when (which amounted to wear everything at all times) and how to duck and cover when a female anopheles mosquito malaria threat emerged. We were given malaria test kits that required us to take a sample of our own blood—that is, deliberately cutting ourselves in the field. Not as bad as malaria! We learned of the options for treatment and preventative medication and the fact that Larium<sup>1</sup> could result in permanent damage to your mental health. There is a clear logic attached to the fact that Larium is still being manufactured and prescribed—that malaria is clearly

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1 Mefloquine, an anti-malarial medication sold under the brand name Larium.

worse than permanent psychosis. If there is one good thing that emerged from the Exxon Valdez disaster (I thought), it is that fewer people in the world are going to contract malaria.

However, the PNG highlands had changed me forever—sometime later, I returned to the University of Melbourne to find Martha and change my career and life immeasurably for the better. Little did I know that, in my choice of the Middle Fly as a field site, still shit-scared of malaria, I was about to enter female anopheles mosquito ground zero. I had with me all my ExxonMobil-issued head-to-toe protective netting, repellent for your skin that melts plastic and my as-yet unused malaria self-test kit. However, this time, I had taken with me something that no doctor could prescribe because Martha had started telling me some of her stories of her time in the field. Martha's stories of her experiences in the field emerge quite naturally in conversation, gently and with ironic humour and a compelling narrative that slowly raises in levels of alarm such that you find yourself listening with mouth agape and wanting to rush home and tell all your friends. At least, this was the impact that Martha's stories had on her new and profoundly risk-averse student.

To this day, I am sure that I contracted malaria in Kiunga, although my test kit showed a negative result. But, for a while, hours even, I was convinced that I was slipping into its grasp. Martha had told me about an experience of hers with malaria. Feeling like I was slipping away, lying in my unbearably hot room in the Kiunga Guesthouse, the question 'what would Martha do?' at least made me come to my senses. Martha had come down with cerebral malaria in her unbearably hot room and was so sick that she was unable even to raise herself to the sink to swallow her medication. Martha had tumbled herself onto the floor, crawled across the room, grabbing some pills, dragged herself into the shower and, with a final spurt of whatever energy was left, reached to turn on the shower tap and lie face-up under the shower rose while her mouth filled with enough water to swallow the medicine. Lying in my room, I knew that this was not me ... yet. However, even if it was, Martha had survived to tell the tale; therefore, I was at least in with a chance. And besides, I wanted to be like Martha and have my own set of stories to tell.

Martha guided me expertly through my Master's thesis, and I found myself with a scholarship to undertake a PhD and take another look at ExxonMobil, this time from the other side of the risk-averse, electrified, razor-wire fence. In Hela Province, I faced a different set of risk-aversion

issues, one of which was food. I had with me a veritable rainbow of the antibiotic spectrum and every drop of water that I drank I blasted with ultraviolet (UV) light using my UV water-treatment probe that ran on enough batteries to treat 70 litres (and I had a spare set of batteries with me). But, what I hadn't expected were the times when I simply found it difficult to obtain enough food to eat or a balance of foods that would supply me with sufficient nutrients. I should probably come clean at this point and reveal that I have an aversion to illness. One small grace of the PNG LNG project was that the companies sourced locally grown produce to feed their staff—the last time I was in the PNG highlands, I experienced some of the best food I have ever eaten. Not only that, I had 24-hour access to a soft-serve ice cream machine. But, on the other side of the fence, I had no land and, before I could establish myself and become immersed, I had no *wantoks* to save me. I had also started my fieldwork at the tail end of the drought that eventually drew in support of the UN World Food Program. All I had for support and nourishment were Martha's stories. How on earth was I going to survive on tinned fish and noodles and what the hell are lamb flaps? What would Martha do? Martha also undertook her PhD fieldwork during a drought, but she managed to cop the whole drought. It was literally days before I figured out my situation. Martha had told me about how she was chronically short of food for months, losing a serious amount of weight—when she did return to the broader, market economy, she found herself eating an entire block of butter, which would normally make anyone ill, but her state was such that her body was able to take in maybe half a pound of butter. After that experience, Martha produced some of the most admired ethnographic writing of the discipline and continued to have a really successful career. These footsteps cannot be bad. In the end, I did lose weight (because I got giardia)—but, if I was lighter and more agile of mind, it was largely because there seemed to be a 'Martha did it tougher' story for every occasion and I knew that Martha believed in what I was doing and knew that I could do it.

To conclude my reflection, I want you to imagine a scenario in which you are the sole passenger in a small aircraft trying to land on an island in the Bismarck Sea. There is too much cloud cover and the pilot cannot land. You notice that the pilot is starting to sweat and become agitated and seems to be fiddling more than usual with the controls. Eventually, he turns and says those eight little words that few people have heard from a pilot and then lived to tell the tale: 'we are going to run out of fuel'.

So, the pilot says to tie this belt to you so you don't fall out, go to the back and start throwing out all the cargo. You do, and the pilot says that he will go back and land on a remote little airstrip inland and drop you off. He does, and you are left alone with absolutely no idea where you are, except that you are in PNG. So, you wait until dark and then you can see firelight about two kilometres away. You walk towards that light and come to a little village where nobody can speak your language, or you theirs—but they are kind to you and keep you fed. The only way out is to get back on that plane, when and if it comes to collect you. I can imagine myself thinking, maybe I could just live here, in this nice little village where people are kind, and everything is safe—and I will never have to get on a plane again. However, you have work to do and stories to tell, and your stories will contain little details that are important to people in ways that you do not realise, and you will inspire and be part of the makeup of your students in ways that you do not know. What would Martha do? Martha got back on that plane.

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