

Epilogue

Rabaul town still exists. It is much smaller than it was before the 1994 eruption but it continues to perform a strategically important role, situated alongside the shipping wharves that serve the economic needs of East New Britain Province. It is home to a vibrant local market and some development has taken place eastwards in recent years along Malaguna Road and elsewhere. The remnant town is situated at the foot of Tunnel Hill Road, which remains a convenient escape route to Talili Bay and the north coast, as it was in both 1937 and 1994, even during the south-east season. The administrative capital of the province has been returned to Kokopo, the place where the Germans had established their colonial centre of Herbertshöhe in the late nineteenth century before building their new capital of Rabaul in 1910. Papua New Guineans in the modern era have turned the tables.

The headquarters of the Rabaul Volcanological Observatory (RVO) is still on Observatory Ridge, on the same site chosen more than 80 years ago following the 1937 eruption, and overlooking the same spectacular scenery of Blanche Bay and its volcanic peaks. Instrumental and visual volcano monitoring continues there: maintaining and collecting earthquake data from the harbour seismometer network; undertaking GPS measurements at the southern end of Matupit Island; measuring ground temperatures, especially in the Greet Harbour area and on Tavurvur; making full use of a range of spatial datasets of the north-eastern Gazelle Peninsula provided from satellite-based imagery; and maintaining professional contact with overseas colleagues. The RVO continues to work in partnership with provincial authorities in the broad field of disaster-risk reduction, to supply its host department in Port Moresby with status reports on the condition of the volcanoes and is still in the business of eruption prediction.

Can a prognosis be made for the time and size of the next eruption in Blanche Bay? There should be more confidence in answering this question, bearing in mind the vastly increased post-WWII knowledge base relevant to understanding how the plumbing system of the Rabaul volcanic complex works, but considerable uncertainty remains. The reappearance of the seismic annulus, new uplift at Matupit Island, occurrence of 'north-east' earthquakes and increases in measured temperatures in the Greet Geothermal Field are all phenomena that need to be taken into consideration in forecasting the next eruption. Will it be a rerun of the twin eruptions of Vulcan and Tavurvur in 1878, 1937 and 1994, or will other young volcanoes of Blanche Bay, such as Rabalanakaia, break out in activity? Local communities will again be at risk, but at least they will have a stronger information and knowledge base than they did in 1937 when the eruptions killed hundreds.

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