

PLACES WE WERE



Rabaul – with Tavurvur in eruption

RESTRICTED TERRITORY **Les Lyons**

My preferred posting was probably the first – Kopiago, 7000 feet up in the Western Highlands (1963-65).

It was in restricted territory near the Irian Jaya border.

Wild but challenging.

My hausboi Yami cut off his fingers (starting with the little ones) when he had a sori about something significant.

I had to give him a good talking too about this custom as he was also my cordon bleu cook.

The people lived communally in long houses where the pecking order was men at one end and women and pigs at the other.

The society was matrilineal (see Margaret Mead's anthropology texts) and the women owned the land.

They also did all the gardening and the blokes did important work like mekim ol sikul na haus sik.

The grass roof house I shared with a kiap burnt down while he was on patrol (oops, my mistake) and the only significant objects I saved were my ASOPA lecture notes (silly me).

In doing so, I ignored cameras and priceless bird of paradise plumes that the kiap had collected. Upon his return he was rightly annoyed.

Sundays were given over to rifle, pistol, shotgun and other weapons practice.

As there were only two of us in a remote spot, the idea was to make as much noise as possible so the locals would remember the firepower for the rest of the week and refrain from doing us in.

Actually they were a nice group overall; very friendly.

During my time there, the school and airstrip were built.

The school corner posts, carted in from the jungle, were balsa wood. When we were kids, we paid through the nose for balsa to make model aircraft.

A highlight for me was the discovery of a 'lost' tribe only a hill or two from where we were.

They spoke a different language, had different physical features, their houses were in the trees and they were still running around with bows, arrows and stone axes.

My red hair and beard were oddities to them.

Before the day, sometime in 1964, when the territory was derestricted and missionaries were allowed in to convert the locals, we were expected to witness local ceremonies including burying the dead on wooden structures above ground.

It was a unique and unrepeatable experience.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Jean Lowe

1967 saw me at Kumbum, an idyllic coral atoll midway along the south coast of New Britain. Every prospect pleased, except the weather. There were two seasons – Wet and Wetter.

Wet was the build up of heat and humidity to colossal warm, steaming rain storms in the afternoon.

Wetter was horizontal rain from the south-east trade winds, which penetrated everything.

Everyone stayed in their houses, sometimes for days on end. It was cooler.

During school holidays, I visited my outstation schools.

One was at Urin up a greasy grey-green river, which could have been the Limpopo except there were no hippos. It made up for this in crocodiles. And mud.....

The village was full of dim, dull-witted people, some of whom still tightly bound their babies heads to elongate them.

Everything from the ground up was covered with moss and slime.

The landscape was bathed in a perpetual twilight.

Sleeping in the rest house, I woke late one night to disconcertingly find myself lying on a wall.

The house was determinedly sliding towards the river.

I grabbed my belongings and clambered through an open window – now above my head – before the river claimed another piece of real estate.

And the crocs a meal.

A TASTE FOR A DENTURE

Col Booth

Father Dowde was our priest on Kar Kar, an American; a nice chap but obviously lonely. He went for a walk each afternoon. Our school, Namau, within easy walking distance and Dowde arrived like clockwork every afternoon, and naturally enjoyed an SP.

Trouble was, I couldn't keep up the pace, quantity or cost, and I got into the habit of making sure I only had four coldies ready. Later just two. But the good Father knew all the tricks, and soon had me drinking warm beer with ice in the glass. He never made it past our place to the next port of call, the Lutheran Mission and hospital.

The main government station was at Miak. The teacher's house was an older style place with wonderful grounds planted pre-war. The frangipanis were trees. The yard was rich with avocados and pineapples. And the zenith was a private beach with dolphins and crystal clear water.

The Lane family occupied that house while we were at Namau and everyone who desired went for a swim on Sunday morning at the little beach. Father Dowde would join us after his Sunday effort at the mission.

The Lanes had three boys and, being nice people, they didn't allow the little blokes to wee all over the beach. They had trained them to wee into a plastic bucket, which Ted Lane dutifully hung in the branches of an overhanging tree.

This system worked rather well until Father Dowde decided he needed a safe spot for his false teeth before going for a swim.

It was rather unfortunate no-one had told him the plastic bucket hanging in the tree was half full of piddle.

I think the Lanes became better church goers than anyone else on the island for a while after.

MATAUNGAN MEMORIES

Keith Jackson

When I arrived in Rabaul early in 1970, the man most hated man by the white community was not one of the leaders of the Mataungan Association.

It wasn't John Kaputin, who had shocked the colony by marrying an Australian woman.

Not Oscar Tammur whose stirring rhetoric ignited the anti-colonial passions of the Tolai.

Nor Damien Kereku who had viciously threatened the gutters of Rabaul would run red with the blood of Europeans.

No, the man most hated by the white settlers of Rabaul was Australia's most mercurial politician, Gough Whitlam.

Whitlam had visited the town some months before I arrived, and people would become abusive at the mere mention of his name.

"I don't know exactly what kind of Australian it is that settles in New Guinea," he had said at a cocktail party, "but it's a very inferior breed".

Whitlam did more to establish the agenda for political change in PNG than any other Australian. When we ASOPA cadets arrived in the Territory in 1963, Menzies was saying Australia would be in New Guinea for a hundred years.

Whitlam changed the psychology on both sides of the Torres Strait - and the relationship between the two countries benefited greatly as a result.

To be fair, it must be acknowledged that Andrew Peacock continued the process after Whitlam's sacking in 1975. Peacock once told me he regarded his stewardship over PNG independence as the crowning achievement of his political career.

I'd gone to the Gazelle Peninsula as assistant manager to John Waters at the government broadcasting station, Radio Rabaul.

To most of the the Tolai people, the station was a detested symbol of Australian colonialism. For much of my year there, armed police guarded the studios and homes of our announcers and reporters.

1970 was a year of high drama in the Gazelle. There was anger and violence. Prime Minister John Gorton was confronted at Rabaul Airport by 10,000 hostile and noisy Tolai.

It was disclosed later he had a revolver in his jacket pocket, a foolish if typically gung-ho Gorton act. Lives would have been endangered had the Mataungans suspected he was armed.

In addition to my news responsibilities and being assistant manager of a radio station whose listeners wanted to burn it down, I continued studying economics.

Every night bent over a desk, ceiling fan stirring the thick air, sweat dribbling into eyes, trickling down nose and dripping in plump drops all over Watson's Price Theory and its Uses.

Then I'd be tipped off about trouble in Matupit or Vunapaladig or Kokopo and I'd head out to cover the story. I always had two hopes. That the batteries in the tape recorder would not run dry. And that the police had the area properly staked out so I wouldn't blunder into a situation where I'd meet a whole lot of listeners.

It had only happened once and the sight of an armed mob bearing down on me frightened me a great deal.

A month before the final economics exam I never sat, Controller of Broadcasting Jim Leigh rang from Moresby.

"Congratulations father," he shouted down the line, "we're promoting you to station manager. Over".

"Gee, thanks, Jim. Where to? Over".

"No thanks necessary, father. You're going to have a nice time down on Bougainville".

PUNISHMENT POSTING

Brian Smith

After a couple of months at Dregerhafen, I was transferred to Manus and posted to the one-teacher Lorengau A School.

The regular midnight power closure was too early for a group of us Manus Sports Club types who wanted to continue discourse over poker and the odd SP green.

The exception to midnight shut-down was a medical emergency, so we often declared this by way of a pass and a ten bob note to the *bosboi pauahaus*.

This system worked well until the DC, noticing lights still on at 3 am, made inquiries.

Along with the ADO, Cadet PO, Power House Manager, Customs Officer and local didiman, I was summoned to the his office and hauled over the coals. And after the DC had finished, I was dragged into the DI's office for another round.

My inspection report for 1964 concluded with the words, "This does not augur well for the future".

After a year in Manus, I was told by an ominously smiling DI that, yes, I was on transfer - to the Western District of Papua, in those days known as a punishment posting.

I went reluctantly to Daru, arriving two weeks after school started, and, following a rebuke from the DI, was loaded on a boat for two years at a boys boarding school up the Oriomo River.

At the end of '66 I resigned and spent five years right where I wanted to be - in Lae.

NECK DEEP IN IT Val Rivers

The maximum elevation of Daru Island is about six feet above sea level.

It is a swampy and muddy place indeed.

It is always under water.

The airstrip, too, is mostly covered by water.

I flew out in a flying boat.

During my time in Daru, there was not even so much as a tin shed on the airstrip.

And if there had been one, it would have been ankle-deep in water.

One of the practical things I learned at ASOPA was how to construct a septic toilet.

Septic systems are a special problem in a swamp.

The effluent floats.

It's a real health hazard.

Despite this the local doctor, who hated Daru, gave me permission to install one of these devices.

He declared, "Well, we're all up to our necks in shit on this island anyway".

The dunny was built to the exact plan I had in my notes from ASOPA.

TROPICAL NIGHTS Colin Huggins

I was attached to the staff at Dregerhafen for 18 months and taught Grade 6. I had the additional tasks of rations officer and basketball coach as well as doing my level best to improve the boys' swimming techniques. Knowing absolutely nothing about basketball, I trained from the book.

My first dwelling at Dregerhafen was a one-man donga - remember those small, cubical hothouses? I soon upgraded myself to sharing with another teacher in a two-man donga - a bit more comfortable as it had a verandah - but we soon got on each other's nerves and murder was always lurking in the background.

Being the junior, I moved into a Bulolo-type house with big, airy verandahs and a roof cavity that turned out to be a breeding ground for pythons. I lived in dread of them squeezing into the living space.

My hausboi was threatened daily that I would skin him alive if I ever found one of these serpents inside the house.

It was pleasant sitting on the verandah at night, sipping the odd ale and listening to overtures from various Broadway shows blasting out from the record player. 'South Pacific' and Chopin got equal billing and thundered forth from my abode at all hours of the night.

One of the difficulties of this very colonial pastime of Pukka Sahib was that the snakes, too, enjoyed the fresh air. If I inadvertently forgot to check my wicker chair and sat on one of these unhappy creatures, my screams would merge with 'There is a nothing like a dame' in shattering the peaceful tropical night.

The resultant flurry had refreshment going one way and me the other. The *hausboi* would come racing to the house with his seraf and dispatch the offending reptile to a better place.

UP (& DOWN) MOUNT WILHELM

Keith Jackson

PNG being such a seductively easy place in which to do stupid things it's a wonder none of us succumbed to the sometimes very real dangers.

In '64 I climbed Mt Wilhelm, which only gets difficult near the 15,000 ft summit when you must decide whether to inch your way along a precipitous ledge or clamber up a rock 'chimney'.

The true danger in climbing Wilhelm, though, is in doing it at the wrong time of the year, in the wet, when the mists descend early in the day and the cairns marking the route to the top never seemed within easy viewing distance.

That was the time when, pitifully ill-equipped, a couple of mates and I decided to make our ascent. We knew we couldn't scale Wilhelm from the Keglsugl roadhead in a single day and would need to overnight at Lake Piunde at 11,700 ft. But we thought it'd be a quick trip up and down the next day and, wow, we've climbed Wilhelm.

The first part of the climb through the rain forest to Piunde was solid but samting nating for young men. The next morning, however, the clouds were at low on the ground and stayed that way all day.

Howie Dreise, a liklik kiap, was undeterred and set out anyway. Just before sunset he emerged from thick cloud and came whooping down the ridge beside the waterfall connecting Lake Aunde with Lake Piunde.

Bloody idiot. I was relieved to see him and still don't know how he did it.

This was the same Dreise who later drove the Kundiawa station Landrover clean through my kitchen wall the Sunday night he was sent down to the pub to buy more beer. You can imagine how impressed the District Officer was.

The next day looked better for climbing and Howie decided that scaling Wilhelm twice in two days would be a hoot, so we all set off.

We quickly left the vegetation behind and began trekking through featureless rock and stone.

As we ascended the steep ridge above Lake Aunde, we found ourselves surrounded by fragments of an American B-17 that smashed into the side of the mountain in WW2 killing everyone. Poor bastards, there was no way out of there.

Above 11,000 ft the air gets thin and you every step is an exertion. Once atop the ridge, though, there was a relatively flat walk along a saddle before some more rocky ridges and then the last decision point - ledge or chimney.

Howie chose the chimney because he didn't like heights. I chose the ledge because, realistically, I didn't have a choice. I'd failed the rope climbing at ASOPA in '63 and knew I'd do more damage than burn my hands if I failed the rock climb at Wilhelm in '64.

By the time we got to the top at about 8 am (having set off at 5), the clouds were already descending. We had a good view, for a couple of minutes, of the Wahgi valley to the south-west and across Madang to Kar Kar in the north-east, and that was it.

The joy of the spectacle and triumph of the climb now gave way to concern about how to get down.

It was a long and laboured trek. The mist was so dense we couldn't see ten yards.

The next cairn was never in view.

We took it in turns to scout around looking for it, staying in voice contact.

It took the entire remainder of the day to make the return journey to Piunde, including a number of occasions when we wondered whether we'd make it at all before nightfall.

A week later a missionary went missing in similar weather, and was never found, and in '71, the same thing happened to a young soldier.

A couple of years after that an Israeli fell off the track in heavy mist and was killed. Perhaps another tale of youthful enthusiasm overcoming more mature considerations.

These days the track to the top is so ground down it's a watercourse and, in any event, you could find your way to the peak just by following the trail of rubbish.

HANGING OUT FOR A SCRUB

Roger Stanley

I had a wonderful time at ASOPA, buoyed by the camaraderie and social life, but it was poor preparation for an isolated posting in TPNG alongside a certifiable and belligerent kiap.

I spent all my time in the Southern Highlands, most of that at Koroba – which had been 'opened up' only a short time previously.

It would have been OK for a year but anything longer was guaranteed to send me, at least, round the twist.

A Seven Day missionary and his young son ("Look, dad, there's a white man") came to Koroba to purchase some roosters.

He told me they were to replace ones he'd killed recently. When I asked why he pointed out, "They were sinning with the hens on a Saturday". It was that sort of place.

When the time came, I was only too ready to leave. Remembering the Bible story about people washing the dust from their feet when leaving a place they didn't like, I resolved to follow suit.

I stopped washing about a fortnight before I left TPNG, planning to have a right royal ceremonial scrub on my return to Sydney.

Although no one in Koroba noticed, or said anything, I recall walking through the terminal at Lae airport, crowds parting before me wherever I went like the Red Sea in front of Moses.

I must have stunk to high heaven.

THE KUMUSI BRIDGE

Barry Paterson

What a weekend! I was based at Awala, about half way between Popondetta and Kokoda in the good old Northern District.

A mob of us decided to drop in on our neighbour, Peter Burke, at Ajeka on the banks of the mighty Kumusi River.

After negotiating a four-wheel drive over the rocks that passed for a road, we got to Ajeka at dark on the Friday afternoon.

The next day we decided to cross the Kumusi to visit our mate Jerry Vogelbusch at Ilimo. This seemed a good plan – until we reached the river.

The Kumusi gained notoriety in World War 2 when the Japanese commander and his horse drowned trying to ford it. It had not changed its character.

The river was impressively in flood and great trees flashed by. And about 100 feet above the torrent a very tentative cane footbridge was slung.

As the booze was on the other side, we had no choice but to swing, sway and jerk our way across the bridge.

I finally staggered onto the opposite bank, where I silently and sincerely vowed I would never traverse the Kumusi bridge again.

The usual Saturday event occurred. Not sure whether we ate. I relied on my father's wise saying, "There's a pork-chop in every bottle". I had many pork chops that day.

Then, about 2 pm, the rain started and Vogelbusch slurred, "You guys better get a move on if you want to get home across the river".

So, helped by Mr SP, we charged from the house and headed for the river on the trot.

The cane bridge loomed through the rain and, without slackening pace, I hit it hard and crossed in about 5 or 10 bounds. Thanks to Dutch Courage, I didn't reflect upon my triumph until much later.