

Reminiscences of a District Commissioner

Harry West at the PNGAA Adelaide reunion lunch

Sunday 31 October 2004



Jan Kleinig suggested that I should say something about the PNG Association, of which I have been President for 13 years, but I have kept members up to date in annual reports published in *Una Voce*, so I have decided just to reminisce and will answer any questions on the Association at the end.

My interest in PNG started in 1937 when, as an early teenager, I had a link with David Lyall, a young cadet patrol officer who worked with Jack Hides in remote parts of Papua under arduous conditions and great privation and met an early death. Then in 1944, Army routine orders sought applicants to attend a school of civil affairs for aspirant patrol officers. I was interviewed in Cairns by Colonel Murray, later the first Administrator of Papua New Guinea, Les Haylen, the Secretary of the Dept of Territories and a Federal MP, along with numerous others, and 40 ended up at Duntroon to face a bewildering array of notables, including anthropologists Ralph Piddington, Ian Hogbin, Camilla Wedgwood, Theodor Strehlow, along

with James McAuley, Ida Leeson, Alf Conlon, John Kerr (later GG), Dr Lucy Mair, from the London School of Economics, and others. Most were high-ranking army officers at the time. After five gruelling months, 18 of the 40 were returned to their units, six were sent to Borneo and the remaining 16, including me, to PNG.

My first ANGAU posting was to Salamaua where I remained till October 1945, when civil administration was restored from military government in Papua and the former mandated Territory of New Guinea south of the Markham River.

The Transfer of Authority from Lt-Gen Sir Horace Robertson and Major General Basil Morris to the incoming Administrator J.K. Murray was to have taken place in Port Moresby with some ceremony. Murray and party, who had all the relevant documents, were to have flown from Lae to Moresby on the appointed day, but could not do so because of bad weather and it was hurriedly decided that Murray should go by trawler to Salamaua where the District Officer, Major Kyngdon would deputise for the generals, as the documents had to be signed on the soil being transferred. However, radio communications between Lae and Salamaua were out and Kyngdon could not be advised so Murray set out anyway. Nor did he know that on that day Kyngdon had decided to go from Salamaua to regional headquarters in Lae, and his trawler passed Murray's on the way. So fellow patrol officer Bert Wickham and I, being the only ANGAU officers available, as humble lieutenants, got to sign those important historical documents on behalf of the Generals.

I moved to Lae and my first job was to escort 300 highlanders home overland to Goroka. These labourers were the first group of highlanders ever moved to the coast and were flown out and kept under strict quarantine conditions, especially in regard to malaria. They were promised that they would be flown home, but when the time came all available DC3 aircraft were being used to repatriate Australian troops from Borneo. There was no semblance of a road past Nadzab, only the roughest of bush tracks from the Markham Valley floor through the mountains to the uplands. They were not happy about the 10 day trek home, to them through unknown and hostile territory, carrying food for the journey and heavy loads of ex-army equipment they had acquired. In spite of difficulties and my total lack of experience I managed to get them all to Goroka, with the help of Tom Fox of the legendary prospecting and exploring Fox brothers, and Medical Assistant Lance Butler, particularly responsible for their anti-malaria programme. To my disgust and disappointment the Acting ANGAU District Officer at Goroka confiscated and destroyed all the items of ex-army equipment the highlanders had treasured and carried home under great difficulties. I have often contemplated the extent of the damage to goodwill and trust the district officer's stupid act engendered throughout the area.

I was discharged from the army in Lae in March 1946 and was soon back in the highlands where Medical Assistant Gray Hartley and myself under ADO Jack Costelloe looked after the whole of what is now the Chimbu Province. Most of it was classified 'uncontrolled' and tribal fighting was rampant.



Then came two and a half years at ASOPA in Sydney from September 1947 till March 1950, then a culture shock posting to Telefomin to take over from Des Clifton-Bassett who had opened the remote post at the head of the Sepik a year or so earlier. He was evacuated with scrub typhus and Bobby Gibbes got the legendary Dr John McInerney in, just in time

to save Bassett's life. Dennis Buchanan, as an 18 year old lad, loaded the Gibbes Sepik Airways plane that took me to Telefomin. He went on to develop Territory Airlines and later Flight West in Queensland. So difficult were flying conditions to Telefomin from Wewak at the time, when the aircraft used had no radio and because of numerous aborted flights, it was costing 24 shillings to fly in one pound weight of rice. Patrols were long and tough without portable radios or air drops or helicopters. I remember it was more than eight weeks before I found out about the 1951 Mt Lamington disaster.

I was on the first contact patrol to the Oksapmin people, through the rugged limestone pinnacles at 12,000 feet from Telefomin. My final long Telefomin patrol was many days to the headwaters of the May River where, almost by miracle, we rescued an abducted Telefomin girl and persuaded Miamkaling, the headman of the feared Mianmin people, to accompany us back to Telefomin. I will circulate a photograph (previously published in December 2003 *Una Voce* p8). It shows the girl and Miamkaling, and Constables Buratori and Purari who were murdered along with patrol officers Szarka and Harris in the Telefomin

uprising a couple of years later. I believe it to be the only photograph of the two constables ever taken, and therefore very important for police records.



On to Aitape in 1951, with much war damage to be assessed and recorded amongst the villagers, with great difficulty and much guessing, but a commendable and justified initiative by the Australian government.

A humorous memory of Aitape was the Medical Assistant who always put 'MA LLD' after his name – not Master of Arts, Doctor of Literature but 'Medical Assistant, Lik Lik Dokta'!

I also remember the lovely old German nuns on the equally lovely Ali Islands off the coast of Aitape. They were sent there as young girls, knowing they would never return to Germany. As fate would have it they were taken away to Hollandia by the Japanese during the war, but returned to Ali afterwards.

Next to Kainantu in 1952 under dynamic Ian Downs at Goroka, with instructions that they jeep road was to be extended through the ranges to the Markham River floor within a strictly limited timeframe. I assessed, with the concurrence of a couple of practical locals, that the route chosen by my predecessor would be impossible, and decided on an alternative, located by one Pokia, a Sepik police Lance Corporal. Fortunately it worked and the first motor track into the highlands became a reality. There is a monument at the top of the Pass to Rupe Havilland, the on-the-spot CPO who supervised the mammoth pick and shovel task. Perhaps the greatest personal satisfaction of my career was to find that, years later, when the permanent Highlands Highway, professionally engineered, was put in, the location followed almost exactly the original track.

In 1956 I was closely associated with the first agricultural-type show in the Highlands initiated by Bill Seale at Goroka.

Gerry Pentland, one of the new breed of coffee planters but a World War 1 fighter pilot and local wag, put in a fine entry for the best collection of farm produce, but unfortunately for him an observant judge turned over an egg to find it stamped 'Egg Board of NSW' and Gerry lamented his disqualification.

Later the same year, while I was acting DC we made elaborate plans for the official visit of the Governor General, Field Marshall Viscount Slim VC, to Goroka. On arrival day he was to have visited Mt Hagen first but the airfield closed suddenly because of bad weather and we had the Governor General on our hands at 8am instead of 1pm.

On to Mendi to be acting DC in 1957, married in Goroka in early 1958 and to Wau for our honeymoon. Bad weather, and our light plane diverted to Bulolo. An horrendous night jeep ride to Wau on slippery roads in heavy rain, and then a few days later a telegram from Mendi to extend the honeymoon for a week, as the native material court house had been burnt down, the Supreme Court was arriving and the large combined sitting/dining room in the DC's house was the only space suitable for the court!

There was a small dairy herd at Mendi, looked after by two locals, *Susu* and *Milik*. They delivered milk each morning to the various households. One day they were caught topping

up the buckets from a water race and were hauled into my office. They were relaxed about the situation – ‘No worries kiap, we don’t add the water till we get past your place’.

In mid ’58 I was off to Hollandia (now known as Jayapura) to be the first Australian Liaison Officer to Netherlands New Guinea travelling on the Governor’s yacht, which had brought my counterpart, Rafael Den Haari, to Madang on his way to Port Moresby. My position involved the exchange of grass-roots level practical administrative information, experience and material, nothing diplomatic.

I soon befriended the government anthropologist, Dr J.V. de Bruijn about whom was published a fascinating book, *Jungle Pimpernel*, on his wartime experiences around Wissell Lakes in the West Irian interior, where he did air watch work, similar to our coastwatchers. I accompanied him on a trawler on a month’s trip out from Merauke, along the Casuarina Coast, where Michael Rockefeller perished with much publicity a year or so later, and for days up the meandering Digul River, through some of the most extensive swamps in the world to Tanah Merah, where the Dutch kept their Indonesian political prisoners before World War II. Dr Hatta’s name was carved on a park bench. No prisoner could escape from this hell hole, surrounded by thousands of square miles of impenetrable swamps. On a coastal vessel trip in the northern Vogel Kop area there was a scare with Indonesian patrol boats putting ashore small commando parties. At the same time similar small groups of fighters were being dropped by parachute in scattered places and district administration was collapsing.

After leave I was transferred to Rabaul in late 1959. At the time there was a 9 o’clock curfew. No New Guinea national could be at large inside the town boundary between 9pm and 6am unless holding a ‘pass’ from an employer. Everything was divided on a racial basis. Separate schools, hospitals, clubs and cemeteries for whites, blacks, Chinese and mixed-race. Even separate spaces in churches. The swimming pool was for white only. Burns Philp and Colyer Watson would only serve ‘natives’ if they had a ‘pass’ from ‘master’.

As the 60s passed, the Mataungan movement developed. I had a two months’ break in mid ’67 when I was sent to United National Headquarters in New York to be Australia’s Special Representative at the Trusteeship Council’s annual session where Australia’s administration of the Trust Territory was reviewed. It proved to be an interesting experience. The Six Day War, initiated by Israel in the Middle East, was fought and won, and the head of government or foreign minister of most of the world’s countries descended on United Nations headquarters. I was able to see Krushchev banging his shoe in the General Assembly and walking down Fifth Avenue on the Sunday morning. I met Prime Minister Holt at the Australian Ambassador’s residence.

Back to the Mataungans: ‘MATA’ means ‘eye’ and ‘UNGAN’, ‘to look after’ – the Tolais wanted to handle their own affairs. With more than 100 years of white domination, it was evident that they had gained little and lost a lot. Many of them were landless through the virtual stealing of vast areas of land by the Germans, that had not been rectified, and pressures were rising through the demands of cash cropping as well as subsistence farming and rapid population growth, related to excellent medical services. Having lost their land, economically they saw the central government’s move towards multi-racial councils as strangling them politically and socially. There was drama. Police strength was built up in Rabaul to 1,000 – one-third of the Territory’s total force. The Tolais were divided amongst themselves about 50/50, pro and anti multi-racial council, but everywhere was the overwhelming desire to handle their own affairs. John Kaputin brought home new ideas from the East-West Center in Hawaii. The Administration tried all sorts of approaches and brought in many local and overseas ‘experts’. When the well-respected Papuan Oala Oala

Rarua arrived, his mission was misunderstood and the eminent Tolai leader Nason Tokiala came to me in great secrecy and said: 'Mr West, *watch gud long dispela Oala Oala Rarua. Im I spi bilong Dr Gunther*' (Assistant Administrator). Opinions differed at the Rabaul, Moresby and Canberra levels and loyalties were divided.

Sir Hugh Foot came with a United Nations Visiting Mission in 1964 and advocated much earlier independence than had previously been proposed. Gough Whitlam came in 1970 and my clash with him led to hours of debate in the House of Representatives with senior politicians either praising or denouncing me, along party lines. What, to me, at Gough's meeting with the Gazelle Peninsula Multi-racial Council, was a brief, polite and essential factual correction was to him arrogant, bureaucratic interference. Years later, at a memorial service for Sir John Guise (PNG's first Governor General) at St Andrews Cathedral in Sydney, Gough approached me and said, 'We had harsh words last time we met, didn't we?'

Prime Minister Gorton visited Rabaul not long after Gough and was met by about 10,000 Mataungan supporters at the airfield. An equal number of multi-racial council supporters awaited him at Queen Elizabeth Park. As the Prime Minister's plane landed, the mood of the crowd being addressed by Mataungan leaders was reaching fever point. Then the loudspeaker system failed. As planned, vital wires were cut by undercover police and reasonable calm prevailed, but the situation was tense until Mr Gorton left Rabaul. A navy patrol boat was positioned to evacuate him, if necessary.

Next, PNG Administrator David Hay arrived to tour the Gazelle Peninsular. I was instructed that there was to be no police presence, where ever he went. I conferred with Superintendent Bill Burns and we had no doubts that covert riot squad surveillance was essential. On the first day of the tour, the Administrator and I went first to Bai village as arranged. There was clear uneasiness, but fortunately we arrived earlier than expected. We moved on to Malaguna. As Mr Hay emerged from the car he was attacked, but District Officer Jim Fenton threw himself between the Administrator and the attackers, and took the blow. Bill Burns' riot squad of 30 was on the spot and the situation saved. We sped on to Kokopo and Mr Hay was moved back to Rabaul by sea. That day there were many attacks by Mataungans on council supporters throughout the Gazelle Peninsular.

Soon there was a top level conference in Moresby. Cabinet Ministers came from Canberra. The question was whether the Administrator should be given authority to use the army in a civil situation if the "Gazelle Problem" could not be contained by the police. Minister for the Army Malcolm Fraser, following long established convention said 'No' however Prime Minister Gorton, who had recently witnessed the circumstances first hand, said 'Yes'. Fortunately the unrest did not deteriorate beyond police capacity. Not long afterwards, in the Liberal Party Room, John Gorton used his casting vote against himself on a tied motion of confidence in the party leadership and Billy McMahon became Prime Minister.