

VENTURING INTO THE UNKNOWN

Change can be very scary. Most of us like our familiar comfort zones where each day is relatively predictable, but sometimes it is very refreshing to break out of the mould. By the middle of 1974 I had already been teaching for a few years and I became fascinated by the possibility of working in a developing country. I had read the publicity in the newspaper where Australians had volunteered their services overseas and subsequently what exciting adventures they encountered.

I must have stood outside the offices of the A.V.A. (Australian Volunteers Abroad) office in Fitzroy for about 15 minutes before summoning up enough courage to knock on the door. Upon entering, I was greeted with reassuring smiles and was referred to Terry Lloyd's office. He was a young handsome man with a fine crop of black hair. We shook hands and I could see within a short space of time that my vague thoughts could become a reality.

Over 100 expectant volunteers gathered at Melbourne University early in 1975 for an orientation course of ten days before dispersing to several countries. Thirty-five of us had been earmarked to travel to our nearest neighbour, Papua New Guinea and I was to go in a teaching capacity to a College in Mt. Hagen located in the central Highlands about 5000 feet above sea level.

It was quite disconcerting to land on the first leg of our journey in Port Moresby and to see thousands of silent brown faces. I learnt later that the people were fascinated by aircraft, and they often stood at the terminal just to watch those strange, white, odd, shaped foreigners disembarking like us.

Quite soon, we were on the final part of our journey. Air crashes had been frequent in this part of the world and by just looking out the window you could understand why. We were surrounded by towering mountains on all sides, and I hoped that the weather would not close in. The vegetation was a darker shade of green than I had expected, and the rugged jungle terrain seemed impenetrable. By the time we came closer to Hagen the pilot suddenly dipped the wings of the aircraft at an angle so steep that it prompted me to grasp my seat firmly. We then descended in a series of corkscrew circles heading for the Waghi valley which was only discovered by the Leah brothers as recently as 1935. At that time, they were amazed to find over 100 000 tribal people living an agricultural existence.

We were relieved when the aeroplane made a safe landing and we taxied to the tiny terminal with the solitary sign which read - 'Welcome to Mt. Hagen Airport'. There was an instant feeling that we had been projected back into an ancient time zone. Large family groups were quietly squatting down

on the ground chewing betel nut and sugar cane. We were met by a tall, balding, confident but friendly priest with an American accent: Fr. McVinney. He extended his hand in friendship. "Welcome aboard" was his initial greeting, and it wasn't long before we threw our luggage in the back of the twin cab, blue coaster truck and we were on our way. The locals were short, stocky individuals who had been conditioned no doubt over the generations by climbing those enormous mountains. They had tight, fuzzy, curly hair and were certainly healthy, strong individuals. The women wore colourful tropical dresses obtained from the Chinese stores in town, while most of the males wore nothing but matted string mesh which hung loosely from a bamboo belt in the front and their behinds were covered with a term we would find crude, referred to in pigeon as 'arse grass'. As we travelled into town, it was quite incongruous to see some people from this unique culture, holding umbrellas above their heads and wearing gum boots.

Soon, we were introduced to the 'Holy Trinity Teachers' College family' and immediately with a warm welcome from everybody, we felt content that this was our new home. The staff were certainly an interesting crew, but I developed an immediate rapport with Alan. He sported a short goatee beard, had a devilish sense of humour, and exhibited an extremely outgoing personality. It wasn't too long before I found out that he was a talented musician, and it was he who introduced me to the world of motorbikes.

Alan's pride and joy was a red "Montessa" trail bike, and he was soon hunting around for a bike that I could use. It didn't take him too long either and he produced a black monster which was an Austrian bike with the brand name 'Puch' on the side. It was probably double the weight of Alan's machine and it seemed like about a 1950's model. I think I could remember the Germans riding similar ones in some of those war movies. Alan was full of enthusiasm. "We can strip it down, paint it up and put new tyres on it", he eagerly commented.

Well Alan was a man of action, and it wasn't too long before the bike was ready, and we were off on a trial run. The gear changes were managed by pushing a lever up with your right foot while the brakes and throttle were manipulated on the handlebar. It was the start of many fun weekends throughout the rest of the year but also punctuated by a series of mishaps. That seems to be the way with the reputation motor bikes have and this coupled with youthful energy and inexperience was a sure recipe for accidents.

Soon, my confidence was growing with lots of practice and one afternoon we were out on the back roads and trails. We were joined by Adrian who was a member of the VSO (Volunteer Service Organisation) from England. He had a lean bodily frame and sported long straight shoulder length blond hair. He was

an experienced trail bike rider, and he was starting to know the local area very well. But Alan always had daring written on his face and he quickly found an opportunity to make his mark. He roared down a steep unmade track and skimmed through the water at the bottom. The stream in the gully seemed to be only about a foot deep but he shot a spray of water high into the air from both sides of his 'Montessa' and it really impressed me. Adrian then followed and gave a wonderful display which demonstrated his accomplished skills. Not to be outdone, I opened the throttle on the 'Puch' and headed for the water with the intention of causing a monumental wave on each side. I might not have much finesse I thought but I had size on my side and that was sure to create a mighty splash. So, I opened the throttle and roared down the hill, but as I hit the stream, to my complete amazement, I suddenly felt the bike disappearing beneath the drink. In no time at all, the motor gave a last desperate gasp and a cloud of smoke rose from the choked exhaust pipe. Of course, the devious colluders were rolling around laughing because they knew that the track across the creek was quite narrow. Naturally, I had missed it, and here I was still sitting on my bike with only the handlebars visible above the water. After the mandatory, mocking laughter, the three of us heaved on that heavy hunk and got it over to the bank. Once we drained the crank casing it started like a beauty. From that day on, I learnt not to trust Adrian and especially not, Alan.

The second incident was more life threatening. We rode about 50 miles east down the Waghi valley to Banz. Once we reached our destination, we rode into the school which was run by the Christian Brothers and at the time we noticed there were decorations all around the classrooms and lawns because of the imminent date of Independence for PNG approaching on Sept 16th 1975. Before long I met a friendly young Brother by the name of Rod Ellyard, and I was next to catch up with him about 20 years later when we taught together in Broome Western Australia. We had a very enjoyable afternoon with Brother Rod giving us a guided tour of the school but on the return journey I skidded on gravel with the motorbike and did a somersault over the handlebars. I only wished someone could have videotaped it because it would have been quite impressive. Fortunately, I was all right, but the front light was smashed, and the handlebar was pushed around at an odd angle but with some minor repairs we were off on our way again.

By the time we reached the outskirts of Hagen, the sun had set but Alan hatched a brilliant idea as usual. Since I had no lights at all, he suggested that I ride close behind him on the final stretch to home so I could use his headlamp. This worked brilliantly until we flashed past a police car waiting on the side of the road for a stake out. I wasn't sure if he noticed us and as we drove around the next corner, just to make sure, I screeched to a halt, pushed the bike into the nearby long grass and dropped down to hide. Within a minute the blue police wagon with its light

flashing and siren wailing had reached Alan and pulled him over. “Wanim poro bilong yu?” (loosely translated means – “where’s your mate?”), the officer inquired. “Mi no save” (I haven’t got a clue) Alan replied as he incredulously looked back into the darkness. I then had second thoughts about the course of action I had taken. A better idea was to come out from my hiding place and think up something really quick. With that thought, I came back on to the highway and pushed my bike up to the site of the interrogation. My pidgin English wasn’t the best, so I explained to Alan that a stone had hit my light from his back wheel and I had to stop because it was too dangerous to continue riding. I could see a puzzled look on Alan’s face but as the penny began to drop, I could see him thinking – “good one Kaney!” Alan had the ‘gift of the gab’ and he did a great job convincing the stocky officer in the dark blue uniform that I had done the sensible thing in stopping and walking my bike along the side of the road.

Perhaps the most potentially hazardous accident happened in the College grounds one Sunday afternoon. The roar of our motorbikes had drawn a large group of school kids referred to by the locals as ‘pikininis’. Alan had spied a large mound of fresh land fill and thought it would be a great idea to scoot up the slope and drop down on the other side. There were four of us clowning around as we were joined by John the carpenter on this occasion. He was a very friendly, generous guy from central Victoria who had a striking appearance. He came from Ned Kelly country and I’m sure he would have fitted in well with his gang. His hair was long and unruly, and his eyes peeped out from behind a massive black beard. We did endless circuits and each leap into the air with our bikes brought adoring yells from the kids. We became more and more daring, and Alan was in his element flying up the now well-formed ramp, rising high above the take-off area and landing on the back tyre. I then decided to throw caution to the wind, so I opened the throttle up on the runway and headed for my moment of glory. I hit the target and rose impressively into the air but then the scene started to turn nasty. As I was airborne the bike kept revolving, and I knew that if I didn’t think up something quick it would crash down on top of me. In an instant I decided to abort my stunt but to my horror, two of my fingers became jammed in the brake cable. There was only one thing to do - yank as hard as I could. This worked and I found myself tumbling clear of the bike. As I rose to my feet the kids were going crazy with delight, but I noticed that I had torn my fingers down to the bone. Bravely, or stupidly I closed my hand up, started the bike up again and headed off for one last circuit. Of course, my last effort was tokenly half-hearted as I desperately tried to hide my injury and show that I was not hurt. I then raised my clenched fist in a goodbye gesture to the adoring crowd and headed for home. My mates sensed that I was not OK and followed the ‘tale tail’ blood trail to where my bike was parked. I quickly owned up that I was in a bad way, and I was shuttled off to the hospital for stitches.

Alan's pranks were not restricted to motor bikes. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, he was trying his best to shock us. I was soon to learn that apart from being a talented lead guitarist, Alan had a light plane license. He needed to keep his hours up and this required regular trips in the College Cessna. I remember flying down to the town of Mendi in the Southern Highlands just to buy a new 'Yashica' camera. But probably the trip which took years off my life was the journey to Madang. We flew out of Hagen on a sunny morning but soon the weather started to close in around us. Trying to navigate a light plane around huge banks of billowing clouds is not for the faint hearted. There is not much room for error as mountains have the habit of creeping up from nowhere and claiming many victims. So much so that Alan's subsequent job for years afterwards was to investigate light aircraft accidents with the Department of Civil Aviation in PNG. To our relief the weather started to clear, and we thought that our concerns were over, but Alan had other ideas. While I was beginning to be lulled by the dull drone of the engine and was almost nodding off to sleep, the unthinkable happened – the engine stopped. There were four of us in the plane and I was beside Alan in the front seat. My blood ran cold and immediately I felt my palms getting sweaty. "So, this is it!" I desperately thought. "What a way to go out!" They say your life flashes before you and this seemed to be the case for me as I recalled frantically if I had enough points to go to the better place in eternity. It was then that I glanced at Alan, but he seemed to be as cool as a cucumber. In fact, to my astonishment he broke out into manic laughter explaining that a Cessna at 10,000 feet can glide for 30 miles at an angle of 20 degrees. But for most people it's not the sort of information you need when facing death. To my relief Alan explained that he had switched fuel tanks on the plane which had resulted in a momentary lean fuel mixture. As the engine resumed its reassuring hum, I felt like embracing him.

The only time I can remember Alan displaying any sign of weakness was the occasion when a group of us decided to climb the highest mountain in PNG – Mt Wilhelm which was over 15,000 feet. We drove as far as we could and then trekked up the steep slopes. It was quite amazing that some of the local people had to be secured to their gardens with a rope in case they fell to their death. Finally, we reached the small hut we had been previously informed about and then prepared for the ascent the following day. After a restless night we arose to a very cold morning, but we couldn't wait to accomplish what we had planned for over the past few months. We pushed on for a few hours up the mountain, but we felt our bodies getting quite weak and it was difficult to breathe due to the lack of oxygen at this level. There was little vegetation now and it was quite sobering to see the wreckage of a US bomber scattered over a nearby range. Soon, we realised that half of our party were not going to go any further. Agreement was reached that those who were able would continue and we would all meet up again in the mid-afternoon.

It became incredibly difficult to hike the higher we went. We found that we could only stumble 15 or 20 paces forward before needing to rest for a few minutes. By the time, the summit was in sight there were only three of us left: John, the carpenter who was a real fit fella, Alan, the trickster and me. Finally, we clambered up the last slope and stood on top of the world. When I say ‘we’ – I mean John and myself. It became obvious that Alan was terrified of heights, which was extraordinary for a pilot. Here he was crawling around on his hands and knees, raising his camera above his head to click a picture to prove he had made his goal. It was such a pathetic sight, and it took great control on my part not to scare him further considering the torment he had put us all through in the last few months.

While we worked hard at the College, we couldn’t wait for the weekend to roll around. Whether it was going to a ‘sing sing’ to witness the culture of the people out in the bush, travelling to the Bayer River sanctuary to see birds of Paradise or sitting with the locals in the picture theatre to watch a Western. Life seemed to be one great adventure and Alan was always thinking up new ideas such as ‘gummy racing’. ‘Gummy’ is the pigeon word for rubber tyre, and the plan was to construct rafts to float on the Waghi River. There was an abundance of old tyres in the workshop and so we set about making designs that would withstand 10 miles of fast flowing water. “H” frames had been tried previously but Alan assured us that the best design was a single board drilled with a series of well-spaced holes so that the tyres could be latched with rope. We put a double layer of tubes for a back rest and finally painted our masterpieces ready for the ‘Apex gummy dash’. Alan was a member of Apex and he thought this would be a good way to raise money.

Finally, the day came. The gummies were loaded, and we departed in the College twin cab which was given to us for the day. When we got to the outskirts of the town large groups of families were walking by the side of the road as they usually did. Alan was up to his tricks again. As we reached one of the groups on the side of the road he turned the engine off, pumped the accelerator a few times and then switched the motor back on. This caused a huge explosion and scared the living daylights out of the locals. They yodelled in high pitched voices –“Ayee, ayee, ayee, ayee, ayee, ayee, ayee,!!” and desperately looked at their family members to see who had been shot. When they finally realized what had happened, they all broke out into hilarious laughter. Soon, we reached the starting point for the race. We unloaded the gummies into the cold water and before long we were on our way. I had been warned that spectators would throw flour on us at the first bridge so as I approached, I reached for my umbrella which I had conveniently brought along with me, and it did the job. Whereas everyone else looked like ghosts within a short time, I continued with a contented smirk. It

was quite exhilarating skimming over rapids, negotiating 'hairy' bends in the river, submerged branches and even small waterfalls whilst trying our best not to flip over. We used home-made paddles and most of us went in tandem. Often tyres would burst or leak along the way and it was a wonder that all of us made it to our destination. I think I finally arrived at the end point with only two gummies left. It never really occurred to us what we would do if we had to abort our journey halfway through. The local people stood in amazement as we passed their villages waving their down turned fingers backwards and forwards and yodelling in a high-pitched chorus.

All too soon the year came to an end. John, the carpenter went back to 'Kelly Country' with his wife Robyn and young daughter Lexi. Adrian returned to England and Alan raised a family in PNG adopting 3 children in a family of 5. I made my way back to Australia and tried to come to grips with 'culture shock in reverse'.