

My time in New Guinea

There are underlined words and phrases scattered through this tale. If you click these underlined words or phrases you will see pictures (just in case you didn't know).

In 1960 I was attending Ultimo Technical College "Night School", studying for my Matriculation. I had originally left school at the age of 14 to take up a six year [apprenticeship in printing](#). My course at the School of Graphic Arts had finished and I was trying to catch up with an education I felt I had missed out on.

I was a shy 21 year old with rather little experience of the world but touched with a sense of adventure (plus very tired with getting home late every night after 8 hours at work and up to 5 hours of lectures).

Pacific Islands were the flavour of the month as the movie South Pacific had recently been released and I remember I had a photo of Bora Bora (cut from a magazine) on the wall near my bed. One night I sat at the kitchen table eating the very late dinner my mother had left in the oven, flicking through that morning's Daily Telegraph when I came across an [advertisement](#). The advertisement touched a spark, more as a way, at that late hour, of getting an education during daylight hours and being paid for it rather than a chance to get to New Guinea, a country I knew virtually nothing about. I answered the advertisement and went for an interview a few weeks later. I did not really have high expectations and it did come as a shock when I was accepted. I had my appendix removed in preparation (being the advice given then if you were going to be away from emergency medical attention).

It was only a short time before I was out at Mascot Airport getting on board my very first airplane, my very first first trip overseas and very first time ever away from home. It was a wet night and you had to walk across the tarmac to the plane, a [DC6B](#) (very like the last scene in Casablanca).

I sat by a window and looked out into the night. When the aircraft was warming up before take-off there were long flames shooting out from one of the engines. Like someone drowning and too embarrassed to call for help, I kept assuring myself that someone in command would be seeing this, wouldn't they?. But I survived the take-off, sat rigid for the long flight and wondered what the heck I was doing there.

The heat of Port Moresby descended like a heavy blanket and I resolved I had made a terrible mistake. But, the next stop was Rabaul. I loved the place immediately.

RABAUL

[Rabaul](#)



[Rabaul Airstrip and Volcano circa 1960](#) offered all kind of exotica of sights and smells and the very present relics of a vicious war. The college was a big adventure with [60 people](#) gathered from all walks of life and I enjoyed it from the very first.

[Class Photo 1st E Course](#)

Even the fact that Christmas came around about six weeks after we arrived did not make me too homesick. The few married men in the group were not to be joined by their wives until later and were the subject of jeering from the rest of us for the way they would get nostalgic listening to Connie Francis records. One way to unite a group of people is to give them something to complain about. The uniting factor was the food. Every meal in the first weeks was accompanied with taro (sweet potato) chips. Actually they weren't that bad and the protest was partly a joke and a little bit of food snobbery.

Every day there were guria (earth tremors), which were terrifying at first but we stopped racing out of the [huts](#) at first onset after the first week. I remember you paid for everything by cheque... even taxis. As was common throughout the Territory there were huge cheque books sitting on bars and elsewhere and you just wrote in the amount and signed. I ponder sometimes on the skills of the bank clerks!

We traveled often in groups of 5 because that was a taxi load. The E course teachers were the source of scorn from some sections. A lot of this was because of the minimum education standard required (3 years high school) and we were so green (I just realised how that word has changed meaning).

One of our group, it may have been Piet Petrusma, had a sprained ankle and did not stand up for God Save the Queen at the movies. The RSL tried to have him charged (I don't have full details on this but it did happen). Practice teaching was often at a Pila Pila village. Pila Pila was on the beach (not in the harbour). It was our idea of a tropical paradise and would have been most people's first choice. I took a trip with a group from the college to the Duke of York islands one Sunday. They live in my memory as the most startlingly beautiful place I had ever been to in New Guinea. I also remember the horrific case of sunburn I got from the trip which taught me that you don't sunbath in the tropics.

[Dominie Magazine](#)

Norm "Dad" Donnison was an instant hit at the college on his very first lecture. He walked in on his first lecture and started talking about how lessons should get attention and be memorable. He rolled his trousers legs up and demonstrated Captain Cook wading ashore at Botany Bay. I know that he changed my (and I'm sure many others) whole attitude to teaching in 30 seconds. The incident sounds trivial but most of us had been through a Dickensian educational system and the potential was there to perpetuate the attitudes into another culture. Donnison arrived after the course had started. We all liked Joe and Athol and Greta but had a special spot in our hearts for "Dad".

Mark Mitchell was a sad case. In the early days when we started doing lessons in front of the group (before they let us loose on real children), Mark was called on to give a lesson on Geography using a wall map of the world. He found it very difficult to take a teaching attitude. He pointed to the map and said, "This is Australia... umm." (long pause). "This is America.. umm". And so on. It wasn't nerves or indifference but a seeming incapability to teach. Not one of us sniggered at his efforts but rather felt sorry for his frustration. Almost immediately after this incident he retreated to his room and was occasionally seen carrying in cases of beer. We did not see much of him until the end of the course. Joe Salt started by saying there would be no final assessment or exam at the end of the course (all the "new" educational theories were coming in). However, this changed and there were exams at the end. I know that I was getting a bit tired of study towards the end and did not put in my best (I failed in the Child Psychology unit which I completed later). There were strained relationships and frustration that were caused by us living so closely together for 6 months.

I had a recorder and I was keen on the Music side of primary teaching (I had never learned an instrument except for some self-taught piano at home). The other people in hut 4 complained whenever I played it. One day it disappeared. I was quite upset about this and pleaded, threatened, did everything I could to get it back (but never did).

As the time to "go bush" drew closer I started becoming anxious. The thought of both the loneliness and the responsibility was great. As it was we did not get out to our postings till late April (I think) and it wasn't such a long time before our first leave back to Australia at the end of the year. We were asked to submit our preferences (anywhere but the Trobriand Islands - as they were out of bounds to single men). It was difficult and I think a lot of us tried to get as close to "civilisation" as we could.

The least chosen place was the Gulf District.

I got it. A posting to [Auma](#) T School just out of Ihu on the Vailala River. I left the suit I had taken to New Guinea and had never worn in the hut. Peter Hill actually retrieved it and returned it to me a year later (I didn't dare tell him I had really thrown it away after he had carried it around for that time).

[Teachers Certificate](#)

THE GULF

On the way to the Gulf I stopped at "Steamships" and bought a weird selection of goods with which I was going to be self sufficient. I had never cooked a meal for myself in my life. Having grown up in a house with 5 sisters (no brother) I had never paid any attention to how anything was done around the house.

I then got on board a "[K](#)" boat going west along the coast. The K boats are rather small trading vessels with a small cabin at the back. The accommodation was primitive and smelly and the trip took about 3 days with many stops along the way. But I did enjoy it.

The first port in the Gulf was Kukipi. Kukipi was between the mouths of 2 rivers and being eroded away at a very fast rate. It was the stopping off place for croc. hunters and had a bit of a Wild West reputation.

I got off the boat and wandered towards a building that looked more European than the rest. A European on a pogo stick bounced around the corner. Later a couple more pogo sticks arrived and were tied up to a hitching post. I was invited to eat there that evening rather than the usual tinned fish and rice on the boat.

I did not feel that I belonged or even understood any of the conversations. With the help of a few beers it didn't matter much. The others went away for a while and came back dressed for dinner. Candle sticks were laid on the table and the Cook Boy was addressed and responded in the best traditions of Jeeves. However, the meal took some time to arrive. At about 11 pm the plates were brought out. On each was one tiny rissole. The others ate very slowly and with displays of relish. I did likewise. I then retired to the K boat, ripped open a can of sardines, ate them and went to sleep. The effect was one of surrealism that made me send a silent thank you to those people (I had no idea who they were). A few years later I was down that end of the Gulf again for a couple of years.

I arrived at Kerema and stayed with the District Education Officer, Tom Taylor, for a few days. Tom sent a [letter to my Mother](#) that I now find amusing to read but reflects my anxiety and youth at the time. I then went on by another boat to Ihu on the Vailala River.

I was taken out to Auma which was on a beach a few miles from Ihu. [A new Single Officers Quarters](#) had been built and it looked out to sea. I was then left alone.

The school, which was one very dilapidated hut, was run by an old (50 ?) New Ireland man named [Wesley Hungrabos](#). After meeting Wesley I went for a walk. Auma is on a giant bay. The tide was out and the black sand went out almost to the horizon. I wandered out so that I could look back and get some idea of where I was in relation to other land marks.

At 3 or 4 hundred yards I looked back. The school was right ahead at the very east end of the large bay. The bay ended with a slight hill. Probably the only hill right on the coast for many miles. Behind the hill was a rather large village, Auma. To west the beach slowly curved as far as the eye could see. There were no visible mountains to the North. Behind the beach was thick jungle and lots of sago palm. I had been taking this in when I notice little rivulets forming around my feet. The tide was coming in. A decision to stroll back became more and more urgent until it broke into a panicking run. I did have to do a bit of swimming to get back to the beach. I never did that again.

Now I had to settle into the life. In Sydney I had never talked to anyone who was not of Anglo Celtic origin. The Italians were the most exotic group I had any contact with. I doubt that I had ever seen an Australian aborigine outside of a book. Our family had never had a car and we only went for one holiday (to Bundanoon) during my childhood. I could even count the number of times I had crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge. I remember, back in Rabaul, asking somebody what attitude we should have towards the "natives". I was too naive to have any predilection towards racism. But it was worry as to how to act. I had a lot of working out to do.

I always wore a tie, white socks and black leather shoes. I did the things that I thought were expected of the position. I worried that getting too close to the people would affect my authority. I was particularly careful that I never even looked as though I had an interest in any local woman.

My first problem was to get some classrooms built. The local people had had contact with Europeans for many years and were not going to drop everything to get a school built. They were supposed to have completed a school before I arrived but had not started. Rather than throw Wesley out of his classroom I nailed a blackboard to a tree and started classes out in the open. The "shame" worked and I had a classroom very soon after.

My First Classroom

I have always had an interest in things Japanese and I one day heard Wesley teaching the children a song "Moshi Moshi Kamio". I asked Wesley at the recess how he knew that song. He said he had learnt it when he was working for the Japanese during the war. "Oh", I replied (without judgment). When Anzac Day came around Wesley came out of his house in his best clothes and a chest full of Australian medals. "Where are you off to ?", I asked. "The Anzac Service at Ihu", replied Wesley. "But I thought you worked for the Japanese during the war", I added. "I did", said Wesley, "but I changed sides". The array of medals demonstrated that we were very lucky he did change sides.

Hair was a problem. Mine grew fast and thick, tending to stick straight out at all angles. The real sixties culture had not yet started and I needed a haircut. I sat down one night with a pair of scissors and one mirror taking very small snips at a time. I ended up with what I thought was a pretty decent short—cropped hair cut. The next day I felt I was getting strange looks. Wesley set me straight by getting another mirror so that I could see a side and back view. The hair came straight out at the back where I couldn't see and looked a fright!

Even though I had contact with Europeans at least once a week (as against up to once every 3 months at some later postings) I was dying to get home again.

However, I did steep myself in local culture. I put a lot of effort into the local language, Orokolo and gathered a lot of material on their artifacts (gone now but recognised as some of the most important in the Pacific) and religious ceremonies. I was also trying to finish off my Matriculation as well as in-service training.

The local Catholic mission wanted a portable tape-to-tape recorder like the one I had purchased for £60. I ordered one in for them and they gave me the cash. My cook boy stole the money. I took the matter to the Patrol Officer but the money was not recovered. The man's brother took it upon himself to work off the debt. The brother was not much use in the house so I let him work in the garden. I probably had the highest paid gardener for the most miserable garden in New Guinea. Still, honour had to be maintained. I cooked and fended for myself for the rest of my stay in that part of the Gulf. The local patrol officer was John Visser (from South Africa). John and his wife were very kind to me and I had a fond regard for them. John was devoted in his work and treated the local people with fairness.

One day Albert Maori Kiki was paying a visit to his childhood home at Orokolo. He was well known and respected even then (1961). Bert Byworth, the school teacher at Ihu, invited Maori Kiki and his wife in for a cup of tea. He also invited John Visser and his wife. John exploded. I did not understand what was going on as I knew John did not voice a hatred of black people. I had to learn that racism is not only hating but also dismissing another group of people as not equal beings even while caring for those people and their welfare.

Teaching was very rewarding as you could so readily see the results of your work. There were none of the discipline problems of trying to teach in Australia (as I found later) as school was voluntary. However, I did not understand for a few months why some of my class seemed so "off the planet" in the afternoons. I then realised that they got stuck into the betel-nut (without lime — so their mouths were not red) at lunch time.

My research showed that there were some beautiful artifacts from the area that related to the 15 year Ma Hevehe cycle as explained by F. E. Williams "Drama of Orokolo" (1940) and others. Two particular items I was after were; the Eharo head mask and Hahao ancestral (or gope) board. There were none. I ended up spending 4 years in the Gulf, looked far and would have paid well but no luck. The head masks were burnt at the end of the ceremony and there had not been a ceremony since the 1930's. Maybe the ancestral boards had also been destroyed as the people embraced Christianity. Note: To be fair to the Missionaries, Bert Brown of the London Missionary Society did much to record and the Gulf Cultures and designed a series of rather beautiful postage stamps with Gulf Designs.

However, I found an old man who was willing to make an [Eharo](#) mask for me. I was summoned to the village to for the handing over of the mask. The man who made it also threw in a [marupai](#). A marupai is a carved dwarf coconut used to perform puri puri. I asked the man if it had ever been used. He replied that it had. I asked what it had been used to do. He replied that it had been used to turn a man into a bird. I was startled at this and asked what happened after that. "He flew away". The words stayed with me for a long time.

After the new classroom was built the people had a party on the school grounds. I broke my reserve and joined the dancing. The music and dancing went on all night and I danced myself into a sort of trance (No... no betel nut). It was a strange sensation and I've often wondered if this was unusual.

At the end of the year I went back home to Sydney for 6 weeks leave, spent any money I had and went back to the Gulf. More because I was broke and had nothing else lined up rather than a great calling to the county. (I do feel I did have a calling to the job).

THE REMAINING YEARS

I ended up spending 7 years in New Guinea. Some of these years in isolated areas. I considered it very unfair the way people near airstrips got air freight allowances while it cost me a lot more than airfreight to get my goods carried to me and there were other inequities.

I was quite starved for European company. The lack of female company, of course, was difficult. I put in for a transfer to the Highlands as it was suggested that most of the postings are near towns. I was met at the Goroka Airport by the District Education Officer who told me I was going to Ino-Onka — a posting that was so remote it took the department 6 weeks to get my gear out there. I complained at once but was told, after 4 years in isolation, that "You are the only experienced bush teacher we have".

In the more remote posting I had in the Gulf, the previous teacher had shot himself in the toilet. The teacher who took my place at the same school was a pious Christian who spurned the demon drink. For that reason (and maybe others) the Patrol Officers and Diddymen avoided his place. He tried to attract them by getting in some beer. They still didn't visit him. I was told that it got too much and he drank himself into a such state that he had to be carried out with alcoholic poisoning.

The highlands had plenty of stories and were far more attractive than the Gulf. In the end I did get more European company. In fact I had 2 Europeans on my staff at my last school, Kapakamarigi in the Eastern Highlands. I finally went on long leave (6 months) and never went back.

I did not accumulate many European friends there because I didn't meet many. I keep in touch with only a few people such as Dan Mannix and Kevin Lock, whom I knew in the Gulf. I do not follow the fortunes or misfortunes of the country in any depth and am not sure who the Prime Minister is.

However, the 1st few years in the Gulf are stamped in my soul as the most formative years of my life. Most of my present attitudes towards people, art and the world start there.

I spent all my New Guinea superannuation on a full time computer course and have followed that path ever since.