The Life of

Paul Bluett

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1770-2026

Haus Pikinini: How Donna Built a Home for Children

Donna's Journey to an orphanage in Wau our close friend and business associate



Donna wau at orphanage

Haus Pikinini

In the 1730s, a Jewish family left Dresden, Germany, eventually making their way to Singapore. Around a century later, their descendants continued the journey, settling in Grafton, Australia.

After the Second World War, another descendant accepted a teaching position at Bugandi High School in Lae. His daughter, Donna, married Chris, who worked for New Guinea Gold Fields in Wau. They raised four children there.

As Papua New Guinea approached Independence, many Chinese trade store owners decided to leave. Donna saw opportunity where others saw uncertainty and acquired three trade stores. Gifted with numbers and blessed with determination, she built a successful business. By the time I met her, she was trading second-hand clothing in Eriku, often from my father's office. She was also a great admirer of my parents, and our paths crossed many times over the years.

Life took unexpected turns. Donna later remarried a Papua New Guinean and had another daughter. Then her heart grew even larger. She embraced a half-sibling of her first four children, and that one act of kindness became the beginning of something extraordinary. In time, she would adopt six more children.

Ten years ago, she established Haus Pikinini in Wau. Yesterday, I had the privilege of visiting. I flew into Bulolo and travelled the winding road to Wau for morning tea with this remarkable woman.

Since the orphanage began, our company has been privileged to provide a drum of fuel each month to help keep it running. At its peak, Haus Pikinini cared for 26 orphaned children. Today, 16 still call it home.

Donna also receives container loads of donated goods from Rotary clubs in Australia, but much of the financial burden is still carried through her own efforts as a landlord, despite government tenants not always paying on time.

As we talked, she became emotional. So did I.

Over the years I have admired Donna’s resilience, generosity, and complete absence of prejudice. She has simply seen children in need and responded with love, regardless of their background.

As I was leaving, I noticed a small piece of jewellery around her neck—a Star of David. It seemed a quiet reminder of a family story that had begun centuries ago in Dresden and had somehow found its way to the mountains of Papua New Guinea.

Sometimes history is not written in great events, but in lives of quiet service. Donna’s story is one of them.

1933

Mums biography

Context of my life

Margaret (nee Mason) Bluett.
Born on 6 January, 1933 at St. Margarets hospital in Paddington Sydney when parents were
living in Birriga Road Bellevue Hill, Sydney. Baptized at St. Marks, Darling Point as an
Anglican circa 1933. Godparents Clarence Mason, Hector George Paul and Phyllis Marjorie Paul.
The family subsequently moved to 12 Griffith Avenue, North Bondi and lived there until 1936
when they moved to Canberra and lived at 5, Currong St., Reid then moved into 3, Currong St. in
1944 until early 1960s.
Father worked in the telegraphic section of the General Post Office eventually becoming
Postmaster at Kingston Post Office, mother occupied with domestic duties until 1950 then
worked in Patents Office and in the administrative section of the Australian National University.
They retired to live in Moruya in the early 1960s.
Helen Mason, (sister of Margaret) was born at the Canberra Hospital, now part of the Australian
National University, on 22 March 1937. Margaret commenced school at Ainslie Primary in
February the same year. Completed primary education at Ainslie and the then Canberra High, a
building opposite the Institute of Anatomy in 1945. Acquired Intermediate certificate three years
later and left school to work as junior typist in the Department of Trade and Commerce in West
Block. Was seconded to work as typist at Parliament House in the office of the new Minister for
Trade Jock McEwen (known as Black Jack) in the newly elected Menzies government in 1949.
In May 1950 Margaret left Canberra to live with relatives for several months first in Lismore
then in Brisbane and subsequently hitchhiked to Cairns in Queensland with a school friend Judy
Browning.
They worked in Townsville and Cairns as waitresses and other odd jobs and

hitchhiked around
the Atherton Tablelands and stayed on South Molle Island on the Barrier Reef. Returned to
Canberra in December of the same year and Margaret commenced nursing at Manly General
Hospital in January 1951.
In February of the same year she met Noel Bluett who lived in Earlwood, Sydney and who
worked as a night club musician and insurance salesman. Noel introduced Margaret to the
teachings of the Baha'i Faith and they became engaged in September of the same year and at the
same time Margaret became a member of the Baha'i community.
Margaret left the hospital and the couple went to live in Leeton, New South Wales where they
worked on farms picking fruit and vegetables and in the local cannery. They were married at St.
Johns Church in Canberra on 27 September 1952.
Noel began to work for the local newspaper as an accounts clerk and their first two children were
born in Leeton. Michael Robert was born on 8th May, 1953 and Paul was born the following year
on 9'h May 1954.
The family moved to Canberra at the end of 1954 and Noel began employment at the Australian
National University as an Accounts Clerk. They lived in 31 Carrington Street, Deakin and when
Noel obtained a degree as an Accountant he left the University in 1958 and they moved to 23
Clianthus Street, O'Connor. Noel established his own accountancy practice in Canberra and the
Civic Co-op Building Society that eventually became the Advance Bank. He was involved with
clients who did well financially during the years of the Capital Development Commission's
building program.
Three other children were born to the Bluett family in Canberra, Dianne Marguerite on 26 March
1957, Gregory William born 13 August, 1958 and Sharon Deborah born on 19 September 1960.
Margaret and Noel were instrumental in establishing the first Local Assembly of the Baha'is in
Canberra and Noel was elected Treasurer of the Baha'i National Assembly in 1958.
In 1963 Margaret and Noel did their first world trip, visiting Phillipines, Hong Kong, Singapore,
New Delhi, Israel, Rome, Paris, London, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Children stayed
with relatives and friends.
The older children attended High schools in Sydney, Michael at Hurlstone Agricultural College
and Sydney Grammar, Paul and Greg at Trinity Grammar and Dianne at Church of England Girls
Grammar in Mossvale and Darlinghurst.
In 1965 the family moved to Goroka in the Territory of Papua New Guinea where Noel became
the first Executive Officer of the Coffee Marketing Board and after six years became Manager of
New Guinea Coffee Brokers. They lived in town in Farmset House, Pursehouse Street and
Garden Street.
hi 1969 Noel undertook a special project of studying the coffee industry in Kenya and Uganda,
traveled in Turkey and Israel and then studied Economics at the London school of Economics and
he completed half a degree in economics majoring in statistics. During the period the family lived
in London next to the Planetarium and the three older children were in boarding school in
Sydney. The two younger children went to school in London in Marylebone Road during their
holiday breaks visited Ireland and Scotland. They returned to PNG through Germany, Belgium,
France, United States and Hawaii.
The sixth and youngest child in the family Anna Lisa was born on 21' March 1971. The Bluetts
lived in Goroka until 1973 when the family moved to Lae and ran various businesses including a
laundry and dry cleaners, started a video club, exported various PNG products particularly
commercial shells. They invested in real estate and were involved in various Baha'i activities and
events. In 1978 Noel acquired his pilot's licence and purchased a light aircraft, a Cessna 183, and
in this plane Noel and Margaret visited many different remote regions in PNG.
Michael became a lawyer practicing in Lae, Paul an Accountant and then went into his own
business, he married lone Salter in Sydney, Dianne became a school teacher obtaining her degree
in Texas USA, she married Richard Wellington, Greg became a TV camera man and was
involved in EM TV the first TV station in PNG, he married Elaine Fergus, Sharon qualified as a

Ballet teacher running her own school in Lae, acquired a degree in computer science, she married
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semi-retired basis. Went into business in holiday apartments and eventually went bankrupt
because of the downturn in the tourist industry in the nineties. Noel was seriously ill for a long
period in 1987 suffering a heart attack, bi-pass surgery, surgery on duodenal ulcers and
discovered he is a mature aged diabetic.
Dianne lives in Malanda, Greg, Sharon and Anna Lisa live in Cairns with their families.
Dianne has one son Justin, Greg has a daughter Rebecca, Sharon has a daughter Natasha and
Anna Lisa has a daughter Madina. Paul still lives in Rabaul in PNG and commutes to Brisbane
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Nathan is married and has one daughter Natalie.
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Margaret Bluett 11 October 2004.

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Margaret Bluett 11 October 2004.

1937

Gaslit

Two city boys sent to the farm



Graham McNally

In Glasgow, before the war, there lived a lamplighter. Each evening he walked the streets lighting the gas and oil lamps, and each night he went home to the poorest part of the city, deep in the slums.

When the Second World War came, children under ten were sent away from the city for safety. They were put on trains bound for the countryside, where farming women took them in and cared for them as their own. Two of the lamplighter's children were among them, sent north to a farm in the North East

Frank McNally was just four years old when he stepped off the train in the Pitcaple station his brother Tom beside him. At each station along the line, a few children were taken off and claimed by the local women. One by one, the others on the platform were led away, until only two were left: the dirtiest, scruffiest pair of them all. Those last two were taken home by the head of the local women's association.

Norman and Rose were pig farmers, and so began life on the farm for the two boys. Over time, Rose grew deeply attached to them. She had never been able to have children of her own, and she raised Frank and Tom as if they were hers.

When the war ended, the children had to be sent home, and Rose was heartbroken to see them go. Back in Glasgow, the boys found their father in a bad way. The strain of the bombing had broken the family apart. The older children had gone south to England looking for work, and his wife had left him and taken to wandering the streets, drinking. He was all alone.

He looked at his two young sons and said, "There's no life for you here. I'll give you a choice. You can go back to the farm and keep living the life you've known."

The boys chose the farm. And you can only imagine the welcome Rose gave them when they came home.

In time, Frank got a croft of his own, twelve acres, and his son Graham was given twenty pigs to look after. Frank was a fine singer too, performing in the clubs and even making a few records. But the croft alone couldn't keep the family, so he worked on another pig farm to support it. That was the world Graham grew up in.

In 1988, Graham came to Papua New Guinea as a volunteer. He spent a couple of years in Popondetta working in agriculture before moving to Rabaul, where he joined Agmark and ran their cocoa division, looking after the plantations, the fermentary and all things cocoa. He married a Papuan woman and raised a big family, and many of his children came through our junior youth classes. Graham became a close friend to us.

When Graham needed medical treatment, he came to stay with us in Brisbane. Now he's back with us again for another health matter, and over these days together, I've finally heard the story of his life.

Last night I picked Graham up from Pacific International Hospital. His daughter Caitlin was there with him. She has just finished three years of dental school at the University of Papua New Guinea, with two more to go, and she has grown into a fine young woman. Four generations on from the lamplighter of Glasgow.

1943

Pilot down

Library up

In 2006 we chipped in to help build a library in the Nakanai area alongside our customer, Hargy Oil Palms. Our contribution was a modest K5,000. In true PNG fashion, nobody seemed overly concerned about the size of the cheque—what mattered was that everyone turned up.

By then, Fred Hargesheimer's aircraft had finally been found, decades after it disappeared in the New Britain jungle during the war. Our previous business partner generously provided a helicopter so Fred could make one final pilgrimage. It flew him close to the crash site before carrying him back to the helipad. Watching him return to the place that had changed his life was one of those moments that silences even the biggest talkers.

Our old mate Geoffrey Heard—one of our mob—had ghostwritten one of the books about Fred's story, The School That Fell From the Sky. When the library was opened, I was asked to translate Fred's speech into Tok Pisin. Me! A chartered accountant masquerading as an interpreter. It was one of the greatest honours I've ever had, and, as it turned out, Fred's last visit to Papua New Guinea.

Then there was his son.

He was an anarchist from Nebraska and stayed with us in Rabaul after the opening. Breakfast conversations became philosophical battlegrounds. He explained why governments were unnecessary. I explained why, in PNG, you rather hoped someone was at least pretending to be in charge. We solved absolutely nothing, but we both enjoyed the debate.

It's one of life's little ironies. Fred had survived war, a jungle, and decades of uncertainty. His son survived several days arguing politics with me over cups of tea in Rabaul.

I'm still not sure which ordeal was the tougher one.

1945

Before Dad Met Mum

Dad before he met mum

Before Dad Met Mum

Before my father, Noel Bluett, became an accountant or went to Papua New Guinea to work in coffee, he was a Sydney paperboy with an accordion on hire purchase.

He'd heard a blind accordionist play at his home and decided he wanted to learn. So he bought an accordion from Suttons Music Store on credit for £50 and took a paper round to pay for it and the lessons.

Dad could hear a tune and play it back. Before long he was playing with Buddy Smart's Accordion Band at places like Cronulla, Coogee and Bondi. Then came paid gigs at weddings, bar mitzvahs and the Russian Club. If someone asked for a tune he didn't know, he could pick it up by ear.

He left school at 15 because his parents couldn't afford to keep him there and got a job with the Department of Education. He gave that away to sell sweets on the Manly ferry on commission. According to my sister Dianne, he made considerably more money selling lollies than he had in the public service. I can see why the Bluetts took to trading.

One day, during his lunch break, a bandleader named André Jacques heard Dad practising his accordion and asked him to join his band. Through that circle Dad met a music teacher, Avilda Reid, who told him about the Bahá'í Faith. Dad had been thinking about religion for years, and when Avilda explained the idea that the world's religions came from the same God, he kept her talking for hours. He became a Bahá'í in 1948.

So by the time Dad walked up to Mum outside a Sydney cinema in 1951, he'd been a paperboy, a public servant, a ferry lolly salesman and a professional musician. He could play the accordion, piano and double bass.

And for his first impression on Mum, he went with an orange shirt and purple trousers.

1948

Mums memoirs

Mums memoirs



Chapter Two – Memoirs of a Baha’i life in the Land of Oz – Margaret

The Third Day of my journey into a ‘new world’ began at the ferry terminal in Manly – like the second day but slightly different. I discovered Noel spent the previous night sleeping in the terminal – why? Because on the first night when we arrived back in Manly the last ferry left for the city, and he had no choice but to stay on the wharf. By this time one fact had become obvious to me this boy was different I liked that. Conversation original, no mention of football, beer or sex, the main topics of conversation with many young men in those days, enthusiastic about subjects I never previously encountered. By the end of the third day, I returned to night duties at the hospital unable to see him again for six days. When he left me at the hospital making sure he still had time to catch the last ferry he said something very unusual for me. ‘You are a very quiet girl.’ First and last time anyone ever said that to me. During the third day he came prepared with a cut lunch and a program. Mitchell Library, lunch in the Botanical Gardens then meet his mother. Photo below Margaret and Noel About to eat lunch in the Botanical Gardens in front of the library. Note suit jacket and tie-on Noel and a new haircut he kept the purple shirt, didn’t own a white one. He changed his appearance hoping to impress me. I learnt later he decided I was the girl he wanted to marry when he saw me in the theatre., then when heard me talking decided I was I hadn’t noticed him at all. . After more on the teachings and showing me some writings including Baha’u’llah’s Seven valleys and the Persian Hidden Words, he asked me what did I think about them. I didn’t have an opinion then, too complicated, replied with an easy answer-interesting’. When only eighteen one tends to be focused on self – was I wearing an appropriate dress to meet his mother?

Working on night shifts – thirteen to twelve hours every night in that hospital, short staffed, inadequate training and shortage of supplies but lots of patients needing care, didn't leave much time for reading. I did read the book 'Portals to Freedom' and was completely in love with the teachings immediately. The book was written by a Christian Minister privileged to meet Abdu'l-Baha. Thinking back, I don't remember anything only that it re-ignited my belief in the next world – the Writings of Baha'u'llah on the subject were a revelation for me, no mention of Hell or punishment only joy. I walked in the city streets during the next few days and golden rain was bucketing out of the heavenly realm all around me and I was transformed - I was a believer.
A spiritual awakening can be spoken of, but words cannot convey how it feels. It brings conviction and certitude, a personal experience too difficult to explain. Walking on air is close but inadequate. When I tried to explain it to my friends at the hospital I was overcome with tears, and they felt sorry for me. I decided not to tell Noel because he would want to tell everyone and make an announcement – 'that he had a good contact' – a man always on stage loving to make big announcements to his friends and relations. I needed to meet other Baha'is under my own terms before he did it.
Meanwhile we met again a week later, my shifts had changed to day duties. One Saturday I returned from duty and arrived in the Nurses quarters, separate building, 6 p.m. the phone in the hall rang. Noel phoning from a racecourse in Dapto and invited me on a date at the Pasadena, where he lived and worked a night club in Church Point. He planned to catch a cab from the city, collect me at the hospital for dinner in his club, overlooking the Pittwater – a considerable distance from Manly he had a big win on the dogs and planned to spend it on a date with me so I could meet his band mates. Much later I realised he wanted to show me off. His first girlfriend, to prove to them he wasn't gay.
Panic – what to wear – only owned cotton dresses, my ball gowns and formal wear were still in Canberra. It didn't occur to me it was a strange combination, a religious boy gambling at the dog races -a young man with Irish genes is always a gambler at heart if not in practice.He arrived about 9 p.m.in a cab then a long drive to the Restaurant. He wasn't correctly dressed; it was a formal place he needed a tie and a white shirt, but the staff weren't concerned. The band members and the owner of the restaurant also different to the people I knew, eccentric is putting mildly but band members gave me a warm welcome. I didn't understand then they were delighted Noel had found a girlfriend.
When the night ended Noel's money all gone, none left to hire a cab to take me back to hospital, so we waited for the band members to pack up and rode in one of their vehicles. By the time we reached Manly it was well after midnight, I was dropped off in Balgowlah and with Noel had to walk the rest of the way up the hill to the hospital. I arrived just in time to quickly don my uniform and arrive on duty at 6 a.m. no time to sleep.
Worked that day in a mental fog – my life had changed irrevocably. Needed to do some thinking about my new friend Noel and the Writings. He was a contrast to earlier boyfriends a skinny gambler, religious, enthusiastic, lived in the fast lane, impulsive, talkative and I still hadn't heard him play. He was, the band members

told me an amazing musician. They were right, on stage he was at home, confident and in the moment – could hear any tune and play it. He had almost perfect pitch.

Noel and Margaret in March 1951 with the Pasadena Gypsy Band members – well two of them Jacques and Laurie Pensini. I drank the champagne they offered me, but Noel said he never touched alcohol – another surprise – nor did he smoke. Looking at him in that photo makes it obvious I wasn't attracted to him because of his looks. He did look much better after my cooking put some weight on his bones, civilised him into wearing a suit – to use an obvious pun which suited him.
Next stage of Noel's program introducing me to his friends and relatives. First event was a Holy Day Celebration for Sydney Community in a room in Piccadilly Arcade. Present at that event were a member of the National Assembly including Gretta Lamprill, the National Secretary. She didn't take any notice of me on that occasion. While I noticed her, lively lady like a matron, she gave the introduction about the meaning of Nawruz both to the Persians, a cultural event, to the Baha'is a Spiritual occasion to end the Annual Fast representing renewal and the beginning of Springtime in the Northern Hemisphere, in the South the end of Summer and the beginning of Autumn. I found it surprising, nothing like the religious occasions in my Christian life conservative, first as a member of the Methodist Church and then an Anglican.
Earliest memory I have of my own spiritual journey in the Methodist Church in Reid, Canberra is singing the most famous or popular hymn 'All things Bright and Beautiful' my heart was filled with the love of God symbolised for me in all created things around me, the trees, the birds. I became an ardent member of the community. In the 1930s the centre of social life in Reid. With Bible classes, picnics, tennis, Sunday school, learning prayers and texts and playing a part in concerts about stories from the Bible.

Reid Methodist Church one of the first to be built in Canberra in that decade, later a Church Hall was added to the property where Sunday School and the concerts were held, then a tennis court, tall trees all around, a suburb of brick houses sprouted like mushrooms, in a park nearby there would be large picnics at Easter and Christmas . Our Minister was a friend, he would often just drop in. I remember him turning up at our house once before I left for school, he was very impressed by my mother's skill at plaiting my hair, long and thick then. When I turned either eleven or twelve our father started promoting the idea of us attending Sunday School and services at the Anglican Church of England, Saint Johns. His argument, we were baptized as Anglicans and should keep the association with that way of life. Although in fact it was caused by my mother's rift with the members of the community about her conducting a play and upsetting people with her bossy controlling ways. Our father never went to church or did his family, he said, 'He went to church for hatching, matching and despatching (baptisms, weddings and funerals).'
I liked the Anglican congregation, not the social aspects but the ambience the beautiful old church, the graveyard with its historical graves, large pine trees felt like a site in an English Village, built by the first settlers in the area nostalgic for home. The morning services as Canberra grew into the Capital City, often had VIPs

in the building, the Governor General and his wife and family, at that time Duke and brother of the King. Politicians and visiting celebrities. Sunday school lessons small and boring, my sister Helen would come with me, and we enjoyed walking home slowly and wandering in the graveyard reading the inscriptions, especially those on the head stones of babies, the artificial flowers under glass popular at the time. I became a member of the Young Anglicans, don't remember much except studying for confirmation and allowed to attend Holy Communion on Sunday mornings – I would diligently go to church early by myself until I was sixteen years of age and allowed a sip of the communion wine.

St. Johns Church of England in Canberra

Anglican High Church congregations were engaged with ceremony, dogma, protocol, and history- particularly of England. It may have changed to adapt to the social changes in the developing world and in places like Africa. However, two experiences in the church were responsible for my claiming when I was seventeen, I was an atheist – although I didn't then understand the true meaning of the word. The deaths of two people in my life I respected, my maths teacher – who even though I was a difficult and often cheeky student he liked me. The Minister who taught religious studies at our school and the first one to make sense, willing to discuss issues making the study of the Old Testament interesting, funny – depicting religious figures as humans with faults. When I attended both their funerals held in the graveyard of St. Johns and listened carefully to the service the concepts no longer acceptable to me were scientifically and logically unacceptable.

My high school education program, particularly the history and science and biology lessons created my ability to think critically. I questioned ministers who came to school about their beliefs. For example, the return of Christ and his assumption physically into heaven, if only Baptized Christians could enter heaven what happened to all the others. Heaven is not above us in the clouds. The universe is vast, and it is impossible for the dead to rise physically at the Trumpet's call. I decided listening to the service when I was allowed to attend Holy Communion to be blessed by drinking wine that symbolized the blood of Christ and eating the wafer which symbolised the body of Christ because it had been prayed over and changed – was laughable. I didn't lose my love of Christ carefully programmed into me by my grandmother a dedicated Baptist whose love of Christ saved her from falling into depression during her hard life but disillusioned with the Church, the double standards of clergy.

Thus, well prepared to receive the Message of Baha'u'llah, that religion is one, all religions are sourced from the same Unknowable God, the Ultimate Reality, there is no heaven or hell depicted in religious symbolism, the state of both is within you. And life after death continues because spirits do not die, and the existence of the spiritual kingdom can only be understood through belief and comprehension that the universe must have a creator – its exquisite reality cannot be understood without recognition it is not an accident it is an expression of overwhelming love. As stated in the Baha'i writings 'If thou love' me not my love cannot reach thee.' This needs faith and adherence to the truths in all religions there is only one God, one human race, one people and one eternal faith. Belief everything is the creation of a loving

creator who has given humans the precious gift of choice and our lives depend on understanding and choosing the right path to walk. Not easy but essential for our spiritual growth.
Noel organised a program for me to meet his friends, closest friend Meg Degotardi, took me to her office, although I was intimidated by the idea. Had never met a lawyer personally. Not sure what I expected. Meg was a surprise. When Noel knocked on her door, she was alone in her imposing office, windows overlooking Martin Place, no partner, or a secretary. When she saw him, she smiled, he introduced us and walked inside quite comfortable in her presence offered her a compliment.
'You look very nice today, Meg. What have you been doing?' she just grinned and whispered in my ear 'that's because I am wearing a brassiere today,' and laughed wickedly. 'But I have to get on with some legal work.' Hoping to see you again she said and ushered us out of the office. But learnt later she remembered me. She was tall, a woman whose family originated from Croatia, had become quite wealthy consequently confident, quite foreign and as eccentric as Noel.
A couple of weeks later I was in Hyde Park sitting on a park bench eating my lunch when a young woman sat beside me, a reporter for the A.B.C. Weekly, a small magazine which most people in Sydney read because it printed programs on radio, both commercial and on the Government station. Radio was the only amusement and means of supplying information in 1950, news and current affairs apart from newspapers. The reporter told me she was doing a survey on 'Youth Speaks' she was interested in their opinion about religion as it was becoming obvious church attendance by young people was shrinking.
'I told her it's interesting you should ask me because I have just been studying a new religion 'The Baha'i Faith' and enthusiastically told her all about it including the basic principles. Unbeknown to me she wrote an article printed in the Weekly containing mostly what I said, it certainly interested her. It surprised the National Assembly members apparently, at that time press were reluctant to print anything about the Faith – it wasn't news they said. The only mention of the new faith in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1944 when the Headquarters was purchased in Paddington it was news, have a copy of that article.
At the next meeting of the NSA, they discussed the mention of the 'Faith in the ABC Weekly by a name they didn't recognise, however Meg Degotardi thought it was me. She asked Noel and he confirmed it. Which made me think and pray for a solution, how I can announce my desire to be a Baha'i so the friends would know it was my decision and not because of Noel putting pressure on me, silly really however it turned out the right idea. I must have prayed for a solution because it came quickly.
Noel wanted me to see him play his accordion and meet his favourite relatives. He was playing at a birthday party in Milperra, a suburb on the outskirts of Sydney. I was on duty that evening and couldn't be there in time told him I would catch the train and phone him at their house when I arrived at the East Hills station. My knowledge of train routes in Sydney was inadequate, I caught one on the wrong line realised it when we reached Jannali. I recognised the name because my grandfather lived in the area. It was the Southern Line, oops got off, realising I needed to return to Central Station, on the train back to Sydney I was surprised to see the Secretary

of the National Assembly, Gretta Lamprill sitting the first carriage. She didn't recognise me of course but was very surprised when I sat next to her and announced I wanted to be a Baha'i.
Her response was immediate, 'My Dear Child' she said 'You don't know anything about it. You must study with me. Can you come every Thursday evening I have a class and would like you to come?' She gave me the address in Paddington. I said I would come. Returned to Central found the East Hills Line and on arrival at the correct station about 11 p.m. The Railway Station was closed no way I could phone the Bluett's who lived in Pozieres St. Milperra. Noel had written it down for me and I consulted a map and followed the route along the Georges River, through a swamp, a road less travelled very little light except the stars. I- didn't see anyone, not frightened, I knew I had Divine protection on a mission to tell Noel I was becoming a Baha'i. On arrival at the right house, about midnight party in full swing – everyone was very surprised to see me knocking on the front door. Noel especially. They couldn't believe I would walk along the river, on a very dark night through the swamp by myself and not be afraid – a change had enveloped me from then on no matter how bad the road or how hard the life or the problems both physical or financial we faced I believed I was protected and divinely guided - how else could have all those co-incidents have occurred without a purpose.

Margaret the Student Nurse in front of the hospital Morgue not afraid of anything.

1948

The Pasadena Nightclub: Where Dad’s Music Changed His Life

The night club set the platform for his life



Dad outside the club in Gypsy costume

The Pasadena Nightclub — Where Dad’s Music Changed His Life

In 1949, my father, Noel Bluett, was a young musician playing the accordion at the Pasadena Nightclub at Church Point, overlooking Sydney’s beautiful Pittwater.

The Pasadena was quite a fashionable establishment in those days, with live orchestras, dancing, cabaret entertainment and a splendid ballroom. It was the sort of place where Sydney society could dress up for an evening of music and dancing.

Dad had a rather unusual job on Sundays.

He would dress in a colourful gypsy costume, complete with a red scarf, and stand on the balcony playing his accordion to the passing traffic.

We have a wonderful old photograph of him in his costume, looking every inch the young entertainer. I suspect he rather enjoyed the attention!

The Pasadena's orchestra was led by a musician named Andre Jacques, and it was through Andre that something happened which would change not only Dad's life but eventually the lives of his entire family.

Andre Jacques introduced Dad to a lady named Avilda Reid.

Avilda was a Bahá'í, and she began teaching Dad about the Bahá'í Faith.

It was an extraordinary connection. Here was a young musician, earning his living entertaining people at a Sydney nightclub, who through a fellow musician was introduced to a religion that would become central to his life.

Dad subsequently embraced the Bahá'í Faith, and it became a lifelong commitment.

But there was another remarkable coincidence in Dad's early life, and this one involved my mother, Margaret, and a Bing Crosby movie.

Dad met Mum outside a picture theatre and invited her to see Mr. Music, a 1950 film starring Bing Crosby.

In the film, Crosby plays a rather financially challenged musician who is assigned a female secretary, with whom he eventually falls in love.

Well, talk about art imitating life!

Here was Dad, himself a struggling musician, taking a young lady to see a film about a broke musician who falls in love with his secretary.

Little did Mum realise that she was effectively watching a preview of her own future!

Dad and Mum fell in love and married, and over the years Mum became Dad's secretary in more ways than either of them could possibly have imagined.

For example, when Dad decided that the family should move to Papua New Guinea, he apparently left the practical details to Mum.

"Organise it," was essentially his instruction.

So Mum obtained copies of the Papua New Guinea newspapers, searched through the job advertisements and found a position for Dad as Executive Officer of the Coffee Marketing Board.

Not a bad effort for someone who hadn't even been formally appointed as his secretary!

And the arrangement continued.

Dad became Chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Papua New Guinea, and Mum became its Secretary.

So once again, Dad was the Chairman and Mum was the person keeping everything organised.

Mum also worked as a secretary at the Coffee Marketing Board. As I understand the family story, she replaced the wife of a local bank manager, who was apparently less than delighted with the arrangement and considered it a case of nepotism.

I suppose having the boss's wife appointed to a secretarial position might have raised a few eyebrows!

Nevertheless, Mum retained the job and eventually became Dad's secretary at the Coffee Marketing Board.

So the story of Mr. Music turned out to be remarkably prophetic.

The broke musician got his girl, and the girl became his secretary.

Except in Dad's case, I suspect the secretary ended up doing considerably more than typing letters and taking dictation!

Together, my parents went on to devote much of their lives to the Bahá'í Faith, particularly in Papua New Guinea. Dad exchanged Sydney's nightclubs for accounting, the coffee industry and community service, but music remained an important part of his life.

And Mum was alongside him through it all, helping organise the many activities that filled their lives.

Looking back, I find the whole sequence rather remarkable.

A young man playing an accordion.

A nightclub overlooking Pittwater.

A bandleader named Andre Jacques.

A lady named Avilda Reid, who introduced him to the Bahá'í Faith.

And a chance encounter outside a Sydney cinema, followed by a Bing Crosby movie that turned out to be an astonishing preview of Dad's marriage.

Who could have imagined that those Sunday performances, with Dad dressed as a gypsy and entertaining passing motorists, would be part of a journey that shaped the lives of an entire family?

Dad went to the Pasadena to play music. Through the people he met there, he discovered a faith that would help shape the rest of his life — and ours.

And somewhere along the way, he found his own leading lady, who became his wife, his secretary, his partner and, I suspect, the person who kept the whole show on the road.

Not a bad outcome from playing an accordion on a balcony!

Anniversary of dads passing yesterday 5/1/1930-21/11/2014

1950

How Mum Met Dad Outside the Picture Theatre

Mum meets dad



Memoirs Margaret – Chapter One –

‘Would you like to attend another movie with me?’
One Fine and Sunny Day – the 21st of February 1951 - in Sydney, a student nurse of two months walked down a Sydney street wondering after watching the movie ‘Mr. Music’ what to do with the rest of the day. Rather like the famous poem ‘wandering lonely as a cloud’ deep in thought tall thin young with rather long hair and colourful clothes, orange shirt and purple trousers, began walking beside me and surprised me with that question.
I wasn’t shy or afraid of strangers, accustomed to invitations by young men I didn’t know having spent the previous year hitch hiking in Queensland from Brisbane to Cairns with my best friend Judith. Travelling on the roads in Queensland together was a carefree adventure, nothing like Canberra or Sydney, less traffic, relaxed and generally friendly people, happy to help young girls out on their own without their parents. During those couple of weeks we met different kinds of men and boys along the way and learnt to handle boys with a ‘pick up’ approach. Mostly not aggressive but eager to organise further meetings without much success.
It was not the way in my social world to respond positively to a street pickup. My

excuse, I was at a loss what to do with the rest of the day – on days off from the hospital after working six days on night duty and rather lonely in a strange city, disturbed by all the deaths I dealt with during those shifts. My feeble attempt at pretending I was an atheist who didn't believe in life after death was shaken by the issue of the feeling I gathered from some deaths I witnessed our spirits live on somehow but in what form or why? I was conflicted by the last funeral I attended – the words about the believers in Christ are saved – non-believers what happens to them?
The eccentric young man after asking me to go to another movie with him was surprised by my response of 'Okay' and a nod then surprisingly he asked, 'Are you a Catholic'. ' No' I said, ' I am an atheist.'
'Have you ever heard of the Baha'i Faith?' I didn't know this young man and his story would change the rest of my life. Choices come to us and don't last. That day he talked to me about it for three days – all my days off. He took me to the Mitchell Library and showed me texts – The Hidden Words – The Seven Valleys. Must confess I didn't understand them then – not familiar with Persian Literature.
On the third day he took me to his home to meet his mother. She was very surprised caught in her house dress and slippers; this son had never brought a girl home before in fact never had a girlfriend. But she was courteous though startled. She asked me inside for a cup of tea and then said, 'Are you a Catholic?' Very strange family – these Bluetts – what was the problem?

I learned later they both had disturbing experiences with Catholics and had turned their backs on anything to do with the Church.
Noel Bluett, a professional musician, played with an accordion band on stage from the time he was eleven years of age. He worked in various casual roles in the music world, played regularly with the Manly ferry trio, a pianist or an accordionist with a clarinet and a singer, he played in various night clubs in the centre of the city with questionable reputations. When younger he played with a Gypsy band organised by a French musician Jacques who later plays a role in this story and during the week Noel lived at the Pasadena as resident caretaker and played for various events as a wandering accordionist playing requests for diners or entertaining the weekend tourists. In 1951 he was twenty-one and I was just eighteen very young to make serious decisions about our lives.

Noel leaving the Pasadena in his Gypsy

Jacques, the leader of the Gypsy band at the Pasadena once decided Noel would be a good boyfriend or even husband for his daughter Maree who was rather shy and plain, dominated and sheltered by her father. She was also a musician and studied music at Frencham – an expensive girl boarding school, the music teacher, Avilda Reid, was a member of the Baha'i Faith. During the period Maree discussed religion with Noel she learned he was opposed to organised church groups, more interested in spiritualists and mystics. She decided he might be interested in hearing from her friend about the Baha'i teachings organised a dinner at her home and asked her teacher to come and talk to him. No benefit for her but milestone for Noel. Consequently, he was enthralled by the concepts explained by Avilda and after this

dinner decided to investigate further. She gave him the address of the Baha'i Headquarters in 2 Lang Road Paddington. It took him a few months to gather the courage to do it. He was only seventeen years of age but knocked on the door of the rather imposing two storey residence in an exclusive street opposite Centennial Park about nine o'clock at night. Possibly thought he would be less visible in the dark because although confident on stage, he felt socially inept.
His family were classified by society at the time of being working class, his father in a factory and his mother stayed at home taking care of the family. As mentioned before his hair was longer then, never wore a suit and tie. At night he always carried his accordion or his double base violin with him – only coming into the city when he was playing at a venue. But something drove him to overcome his nervousness and he rang the bell of the imposing double fronted door with embossed glass inserts of rather grand house.
The current caretakers at that time were Stanley Bolton Snr. an American chiropractor and his wife Mariette, a French Canadian. She opened the door obviously startled when he said he was inquiring about the Baha'i Faith. Reluctant to ask him inside or seat him in a chair she asked him to wait in the lobby while she fetched some material, a book, 'Portals to Freedom' by Howard Colby Ives, a pamphlet, and the postal address of the Baha'i Youth Group in Sydney. She asked for his postal address and showed him an open door back into the street probably glad to be rid of him.
A few weeks later he began receiving invitations to events held by the group. It took him a year to gather the courage to attend a birthday party for Joy Margaret Cook one of the members. She lived quite a distance from Earlwood the suburb where his family lived. Short of funds in those days he walked carrying his accordion on his shoulder arriving late. This time the girl opening this door was much friendlier than his first encounter and invited him inside with a warm handshake and a twinkle in her eye saying, 'We were just about to take you off the mailing list'.

The National Baha'i Centre 2 Lang Road Paddington in the Nineteen Forties.

Meg Degotardi, a lawyer, and a member of the National Assembly and with Joy, Frank Wyss and Stanley Bolton Jnr. were in the middle of a committee meeting. After that evening Meg and Noel became good friends and he occasionally visited her office in Martin Place, the centre of the city. Tall, refreshingly interesting, Meg's parents were Dalmatian knew about being an eccentric outsider who loved energetic discussions on the edge and an exceptional sense of humour, always funny.
This encounter with friendly young Baha'is gave Noel the courage to seek out other Baha'is probably knew one is not a sufficient representation. He joined the band of the Steamship vessels, the Manunda and the Manoora travelling the coast of Australia calling in at various posts along the way carrying holiday guests and some cargo. Whenever the ship was in port Noel would seek out any Baha'is he could find, a few lived in Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and occasionally Hobart, whose address he obtained from Meg. Found them all inspiring, warm and hospitable providing him with guidance as to what he should read and study.

He decided to become a believer in 1946 and to his surprise was requested to meet with the Local Spiritual Assembly in Sydney for an interrogation about his motives and knowledge of the faith. Met again, Avilda Reid, who asked him did he still believe in Re-incarnation. He didn’t remember saying it denied it and was asked to leave the room while they considered his request and finally called him in saying we have decided to accept your admittance into the community and will allow you to sign the card.
All very formal and designed to prevent any hostile persons motivated to attack the Faith. A period when migrants in large numbers were arriving from war torn Europe and the parts of the Middle East and could be a problem. Fortunately Noel, not intimidated by this reception attended a Winter School at Yerrinbool, originally the home of the Bolton family, where he met some interesting people and remembered a couple of people from New Zealand including Bernard Dewing.
Only ten people attended that school. Very different to these days when it is hard to find a vacancy for anything held at Yerrinbool – advance bookings are necessary.
Below the first National Assembly in Australia 1930s with Hyde Dunne the first pioneer with his wife Clara in 1921.

2

1951-2026

First wedding anniversary in next world mum and dad together

Mum, Dad and a Rather Long Marriage

Mum, Dad and a Rather Long Marriage

Mum and Dads first wedding anniversary in the next world comes up in a few days so I have taken the liberty of writing a tribute to that fateful meeting 75 years ago

Mum and Dad married in Sydney after what was apparently a whirlwind courtship.

Knowing Dad, I suspect he did a quick cost-benefit analysis, decided Margaret was a good long-term investment and closed the deal before somebody else did.

It turned out to be one of his better business decisions.

They stayed married for 62 years until Dad died in 2014, which was considerably more successful than some of his later investments.

Dad — Noel Bluett — was born in 1930 into a family without much money, left school at 15 and then spent most of the rest of his life demonstrating that lack of formal education was not going to slow him down.

He was a musician, accountant, entrepreneur, coffee man, commodity trader, chess player, pilot, Bahá’í pioneer and, when necessary, dealer in caravans, aluminium dinghies, second-hand clothes, shells, chillies, cardamom, trevally and lamb flaps.

Basically, if there was a dollar hiding somewhere, Dad considered it his responsibility to find it.

Music came first.

As a boy he heard a blind accordionist and decided he wanted to play. He bought an accordion from Suttons on credit for £50 and became a paperboy to pay for it and his lessons.

Soon he was playing with Buddy Smart’s Accordion Band around Sydney and then professionally at Jewish weddings, bar mitzvahs, restaurants, nightclubs and the Russian Club.

He could play by ear, which was fortunate because people kept requesting tunes and Dad wasn’t the sort of bloke to admit he didn’t know one.

His mother wanted a piano, so naturally Dad bought one on credit and taught himself to play that too.

He also played double bass in jazz bands, including for a time with Don Burrows.

For us kids, though, Dad's greatest musical achievement was his accordion impersonation of a steam train.

We had our own private orchestra at birthdays, Bahá'í functions and whenever somebody decided the kitchen needed a polka.

Then came the decision that changed all our lives.

Dad had grown up Catholic but became disillusioned with religion and declared himself an atheist. Unfortunately for his atheism, he kept thinking.

As a paperboy he read newspapers, discovered Buddhism and Islam and began wondering whether all these religions might have something in common.

In 1948 he met Avilda Reid, who explained the Bahá'í principle of the unity of religion.

Dad asked questions for hours and became a Bahá'í.

So much for atheism.

Then he met Mum.

Mum became a Bahá'í too, followed eventually by her sister Helen and her parents.

One conversation had started a chain reaction.

Mum and Dad pioneered to Leeton, where Michael and I arrived, and later moved to Canberra. Dad went to night school and qualified as a public accountant while Mum concentrated on another major family project — producing Bluetts.

By 1960 there were five of us.

Eventually there would be six.

Dad soon discovered an important principle of economics:

children are expensive.

So alongside his accounting work he started a building society and sold caravans and aluminium boats. Our backyard regularly looked less like a suburban home and more like a liquidation auction.

We loved it.

The caravans became cubby houses and the tinnies lined the fence.

Then in 1965 Mum and Dad made the decision that probably shaped my life more than any other.

They pioneered to Papua New Guinea.

Dad became Chief Executive Officer of the Coffee Marketing Board in Goroka.

Four of us eventually went to boarding school in Australia. Dad once explained to us that he was earning about $10,000 a year while $8,000 disappeared into school fees and airfares.

This may explain why he became slightly sensitive about unnecessary household expenditure.

Especially clotheslines.

We had already destroyed one Hills Hoist in Canberra by swinging on it.

Apparently I hadn’t absorbed the lesson.

In Goroka I improved the concept by attaching a rope and turning the clothesline into a merry-go-round.

My brothers and sisters hung on while I spun them around, everyone screaming with delight.

Dad appeared.

The amusement park closed immediately.

Six children scattered across the yard while the Chief Executive Officer of the Coffee Marketing Board attempted to recover his depreciating asset.

Then Annalisa was born at Goroka Hospital and the Bluett population reached six.

PNG gave us an extraordinary childhood: Goroka, Lae, Madang, Rabaul, New Ireland, Malahang Beach, remote swimming holes, mountain roads, village trips, Bahá’í summer schools, visitors from all over the world and Dad appearing at regular intervals wearing a funny hat and carrying an accordion.

He became a prominent figure in the coffee industry, promoted PNG coffee overseas and established a relief fund for growers when world prices collapsed.

Then, inevitably, Dad returned to business.

In Lae he traded shells, bird’s-eye chillies and cardamom, imported second-hand clothes, trevally and lamb flaps, and bought a laundry and dry-cleaning business that later became a video shop.

There wasn’t an obvious business plan.

The business plan seemed to be:

What’s available?

Dad gave us jobs, and without really noticing it we learned bookkeeping, accounting, trading and the basic principle that money going out should preferably be followed by slightly more money coming back in.

That lesson certainly stuck with me.

Dad had some absolute rules.

No smoking.

No drinking.

He had watched alcohol and cigarettes destroy his own father's health and had zero tolerance for either long before he became a Bahá'í.

Some of his children occasionally tested these policies.

The compliance department was severe.

Dad also loved chess and became good enough to represent Papua New Guinea at the 1976 Chess Olympiad in Haifa.

Then, because apparently accounting, coffee, chess and six children weren't enough excitement, he learned to fly and bought a single-engine Cessna.

He and Mum used it to visit Bahá'í communities in remote parts of PNG and even flew it to Australia, including one memorable episode when they went somewhat astray around the MacDonnell Ranges.

There is nothing quite like being lost in Central Australia in a small aircraft to strengthen a marriage.

Dad's later business life wasn't always successful. Some investments after returning to Australia went badly and the stress affected his health.

But something else happened.

Dad softened.

The hard-driving entrepreneur became more humble and approachable.

Yet he never really retired. He was still doing accounting work almost until he died, including tax returns for Cairns taxi drivers.

Dad could apparently retire from businesses.

He couldn't retire from being Noel.

When he died in 2014 at 84, he left behind something far more substantial than a balance sheet.

He left six children, a huge multicultural extended family, music, stories, businesses, adventures and generations whose lives were changed because one young Sydney paperboy had the courage to question what he had been taught.

He left the Bahá’í Faith at the centre of our family life.

He left PNG firmly embedded in us.

And he left me with a love of business that may have been genetic — although I still maintain that compared with Dad’s caravans, tinnies, coffee, shells, chillies, second-hand clothes, fish, lamb flaps, laundries and video shops, selling fuel is an extraordinarily focused business model.

Dad used to tell us that he prayed for every member of the family every day.

Looking back, with six children and everything we got up to, I’m not surprised.

He probably needed to.

And somewhere, I like to imagine Noel still has an accordion, a set of accounts, a chessboard and a new business proposition.

And Margaret is still asking:

“Noel, what have you bought now?”

1951-1965

Dad was a clever fellow

How did I get to png the short version

Dad was a clever fellow. So clever, in fact, that he and his two brothers attended a special school in Sydney for the intellectually gifted and the intellectually challenged. I never quite worked out which category the school thought they belonged in, but judging by the results, probably a bit of both.

Unfortunately, Dad and his father didn't see eye to eye, so at the ripe old age of fourteen he packed up and left home. While most boys his age were worrying about homework, Dad became a lolly boy on the Manly Ferry. The pay was better than playing in a band, which was handy because musicians have always been paid mainly in applause and broken promises.

His girlfriend's father happened to manage the band, and one day Dad was enthusiastically explaining his latest theories.

"All religions come from the same God. All people are equal."

The manager listened patiently and finally said,

"You sound exactly like a music teacher I know at a girls' school. Her name's Avila Reid. She's a Bahá'í."

Dad was eighteen. His own father insisted he attend Mass every Sunday at Earlwood Catholic Church while he himself headed off to the pub.

As Dad later summarised:

"Do as I say, not as I do."

This naturally raised a few questions.

Dad began asking them.

The Bahá'í Faith supplied answers.

And thus began a spiritual journey that lasted the rest of his life.

Around the same time, one of Dad's cousins offered some life-changing advice:

"If you want a good wife, marry a nurse."

Dad took this as a direct instruction from Heaven.

Standing outside a cinema one day, he spotted a young nurse emerging from a screening. Attractive? Tick. Nurse? Tick. Breathing? Tick.

Dad marched up and asked if she'd like to see a movie.

The only movie showing was the very one she had just finished watching.

She had also just completed an all-night shift at Manly Hospital.

Remarkably, she agreed.

For the next three days Dad talked.

And talked.

And talked.

Mostly about religion.

Mum listened.

By the third day Dad finally paused long enough to observe:

“You’re very quiet.”

This was apparently the first time in Margaret’s life anyone had ever described her as quiet.

Mum later reflected that Dad was a different sort of wolf. Most wolves were interested in the girl. This wolf came with a religion, a mission statement, and what appeared to be a five-year strategic plan.

She decided she wanted both.

Soon afterwards they announced to the Bahá’í administration:

“Send us to the hardest place. We want to pioneer.”

The committee considered this carefully.

“Leeton.”

Not exactly darkest Africa, but off they went.

They became engaged in 1951.

Married in 1952.

Michael arrived in 1953.

I arrived in 1954.

Both of us on Mother’s Day.

Talk about scheduling.

Mum and Dad clearly approached family planning with the precision of railway timetables.

Dad wanted nine children.

Mum wanted six.

Nature eventually declared the match a draw.

There were six surviving children and three miscarriages.

Nine pregnancies altogether.

And by then they weren't even Catholics anymore.

Dad's involvement in the Bahá'í community continued to grow. By 1962 he was Treasurer of the Australian Bahá'í community. In 1963 he travelled to Israel to help elect the first Universal House of Justice, the world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith.

Meanwhile Mum was selected to accompany a full-blood Aboriginal believer to a World Congress in London.

I was eight.

I had absolutely no idea what a congress was.

But I did discover what a parfait was.

Which, at the time, seemed much more useful information.

There were no sponsored overseas conferences in those days. If you wanted to attend, you bought your own ticket and packed your own sandwiches.

Then came 1964.

The newly elected world body called for Australian families to pioneer to Papua New Guinea.

My parents immediately volunteered.

Let's review the situation.

Five children.

A brand-new house in the suburbs.

A thriving accountancy practice.

A comfortable life in Canberra.

Was Canberra even a city then?

No matter.

The answer was yes.

And off they went.

The children, incidentally, were not consulted.

I know this because we discovered we were moving while travelling through India.

One moment we were tourists.

The next moment we were emigrants.

No family meeting.

No vote.

No PowerPoint presentation.

Just:

“We’re moving to Papua New Guinea.”

Looking back, my parents were different.

Not eccentric different.

Not reckless different.

Good different.

The sort of different that leaves behind comfortable certainty in order to build a better world.

And somehow, against all odds, Mum turned out to be exactly what Dad’s cousin promised.

The best wife.

And the best mother.

Dad found his religion.

Dad found his nurse.

And the rest of us got the adventure of a lifetime.

1951-2026

Letter from the House

A long term pioneer Margaret

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

29 September 2026

Transmitted by email: Paul.Bluett@islandspetroleum.com

Mr. Paul Bluett
Papua New Guinea

Dear Bahá’í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice was sorry to learn from your email of 27 September 2026 of the passing of your dear mother, Margaret Bluett, devoted believer in Bahá’u’lláh, and extends to you and other family members and loved ones its heartfelt condolences. Her services to the Cause of God, including as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Papua New Guinea and as a long-time pioneer to that country, are remembered with appreciation. Rest assured of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of her soul in the heavenly realms and that you may all find comfort and solace at this time of parting.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: National Assembly of Australia
National Assembly of Papua New Guinea

Bahá’í World Centre • P.O. Box 155 • 3100101 Haifa, Israel
Tel: +972 (4) 835 8358 • Email: secretariat@bwc.org

1951-2026

The Bluett Family and Islands Petroleum

A family business history, from Bahá'í pioneers in the Highlands to a national fuel distributor.

Prepared by John Broons for Paul Bluett and the Bluett family.

About this history

Until now, the story of the Bluett family and its business has lived in Paul's published stories, in family memory, and in the heads of the people who built it. This document brings those strands together in one place for the first time.

It draws on three sources: Paul's 148 published stories, the conversations I have had with members of the family this year, and the public record. Where the sources disagree, I have taken the most likely account and noted the open questions separately so that Paul can settle them.

It is written to be corrected. Please mark anything that is wrong, missing or told in a way you would tell differently. The family's own version of its story matters more than mine.

The history covers four things my brief asked for:

How the business was created and how it grew, and the family's part in it over time.

The major family and business decisions, and what came of them.

The values and purpose of the family and of the business, and how they have shaped decisions.

The vision Paul started with, and how it has changed into what exists today.

Chapters 1 to 9 tell the story in order. Chapter 10 draws out the values that run through it, chapter 11 sets out the turning-point decisions and their lessons, and chapter 12 looks at the part of the story that has not been written yet. A timeline and a list of the people involved are at the back.

1. Pioneers (1951-1973)

The story of Islands Petroleum begins with a decision that had nothing to do with business. In 1963 Noel Bluett, a Canberra accountant with a thriving practice, travelled to Haifa to help elect the first Universal House of Justice of the Bahá'í Faith. Within two years he had sold the practice and taken his wife Margaret and their children to the Highlands of New Guinea.

Noel and Margaret had met in Sydney in 1951. Both became Bahá'ís, and they married in September 1952. Their first two sons were born a year apart in the irrigation town of Leeton, where they had volunteered to "pioneer": Michael in May 1953 and Paul on 9 May 1954. In Canberra Noel built an accountancy practice and helped found the Civic Co-op Building Society, which later became the Advance Bank. He also served as treasurer of the Australian Bahá'í community.

When the Bahá'í world called for pioneers in 1964, the Bluetts answered. In October that year ten-year-old Paul sailed from Sydney to Bombay on the SS Himalaya, bound for the New Era Bahá'í school at Panchgani in India. As he later put it:

My home ran away from me when I was ten.

In February 1965 the family landed at Goroka airstrip. Noel had been appointed the first Executive Officer of the new PNG Coffee Marketing Board. It was a job that put him at the centre of an industry turning Highlands subsistence farmers into coffee growers. The family ignored the expatriate advice of the day and spent their first Easter in the village of the coffee pioneer Bono Azanifa. Margaret later wrote:

we didn't consume alcohol, didn't want to play golf and were anxious to meet local people.

Goroka also put the Bluett children to work. Between 1965 and 1971 Paul held seven part-time jobs: assembling pushbikes, selling Show programmes, three years at Steamships, and driving a PMV over the Daulo Pass at sixteen on an adjusted licence, with his father counting the takings.

Goroka didn't just raise children - it put them straight to work.

Noel's career in coffee ended abruptly. In the early 1970s he set up a coffee export company with the Leahy and Collins plantation families. In 1973, while he was in Israel as PNG's delegate to the Bahá'í elections, the company's futures positions went badly wrong. Noel covered for his manager and lost his job. Paul called it "the universe clearing its throat before introducing the next chapter."

2. Lae and the trading habit (1973-1979)

The family moved to Lae, and Noel became what Paul affectionately calls an "anything for a buck" trader. He bought the Lae Laundry from departing Australians, added second-hand clothing and dry cleaning, ran a video club, and traded shells, chillies, cardamom and trade goods. He also set up RAC Trading, a Chinatown store with a refrigeration partner. Independence in 1975 strengthened the kina and rewarded those who had got established beforehand.

In PNG there was a saying that if you got established before Independence, you were home and hosed.

On 9 May 1974 Noel and his Rabaul friend John Mills incorporated Anisa, a company exporting commercial seashells (trochus, used for mother-of-pearl buttons) with

branches in Rabaul and Lae. Paul later called Anisa "the tree of life - growth, resilience and prosperity". It was the first piece of what became the family group.

Paul, meanwhile, was becoming an accountant. His mother told him to take PNG citizenship as Independence approached, and he did. In 1976 he married Ione, whose Bahá'í family had long been friends with the Bluetts, after both finished their degrees in Hobart. They had no money; Ione remembers shopping at the university markets, mostly for vegetables. Their first son, Oliver, was born in 1977. In December that year, with Oliver about six months old, Paul left Australia for a two-year contract with an accounting firm in Lae. Nathan followed on 2 February 1979, born while Paul sat his final chartered accountancy exams.

The opportunity that changed their lives was about to arrive by telephone.

3. Rabaul and Gazelle Agencies (1980-1984)

The business Paul bought had its own Bahá'í origins. In 1954 Rodney Hancock came to the Territory as a pioneer, aiming for the Admiralty Islands. He never reached Manus. Instead he started a customs agency and transport business in Rabaul with two trucks. In the early 1960s his employee Tony Saunders took it over and incorporated it as Gazelle Agencies. In the late 1960s or early 1970s it passed to John Mills. Each sale was a friendly handover on the same terms: no deposit, vendor finance, no interest, to someone the seller knew and trusted.

In late 1979 John Mills rang Noel on the office party line. Paul recalls the call:

Sometimes your life changes because of years of careful planning. Sometimes it changes because of one sentence over the phone.

Mills wanted to retire. He offered Gazelle Agencies and his half of Anisa as a package, on the familiar terms: no deposit, no interest, five years to pay. Noel chose Paul over his elder brother Michael, a lawyer.

Perhaps he thought an accountant would count the risks, whereas a lawyer might actually read them.

The deal was sealed over a weekend. Paul prepared the accounts the takeover was based on himself. On 4 January 1980 Paul, Ione and their two small boys arrived in Rabaul owning "one and a half companies, a mortgage and an overdraft". The business came with three houses, a car, an office in a rented tin shed in Market Street, and a fleet of trucks that were falling apart. Paul also became Government Auctioneer for the Islands Region. Ione ran the office administration while raising the children.

The bank wanted security for a $40,000 overdraft. Noel guaranteed $30,000 after some family haggling, and Paul had the guarantee lifted within the year as the account moved into credit. By the end of 1984, about six months early, John Mills had been paid in full.

The early years were about saying yes "to anything that might generate a kina": customs clearance, wharf cartage, packing personal effects, auctions. Ione recalls Paul raising prices gently, trading up to better second-hand trucks, and driving government auction trucks down from the Highlands himself. The staff who came with the business stayed for decades. They included Elena Yaganegi, part-time accountant in 1980 and soon full-time, and her husband Habib, the customs agent.

Rabaul itself was a gamble. In October 1983, as Paul was auctioning government vehicles, a tremor hit and a Stage 2 volcanic alert was declared.

Nobody wanted to invest in a town that might explode.

For the next eleven years the town lived in limbo, and so did investment in it.

4. Into fuel: Mobil and Bougainville (1983-1990)

Islands Petroleum grew out of a customer relationship. From 1983 Gazelle Agencies was clearing Mobil's lubricants through customs. In 1985 Mobil asked Paul to cart fuel on Bougainville. Paul did the sums and pushed back:

I can't make Bougainville cartage work on cartage alone. I really need to sell fuel too, otherwise I can't cover the cost of an expatriate manager.

Mobil's Bob Gleason agreed on the spot. Paul's brother Greg bought a truck at a Goroka auction and brought it down to Lae with a Honda on the back. Paul formed a new company, Kieta Transport, to operate Mobil's depot at Loloho, and appointed a Bahá'í from Malaysia, Baljit (renamed "Bill"), as its first manager.

1 truck. 1 Honda. 0 business plan software. 100% confidence.

It worked. Volume at Loloho roughly doubled within a year, and Paul gained a reputation inside Mobil as a business doubler. From 1985 he was also flying fuel into Buka. Mobil began offering more. In 1988 it gave Paul's group the sales desk at its Rabaul terminal, and a new company, Gazelle Transport, was formed to run it. Paul calls this "the real beginning". Kimbe followed in about 1989 and Kavieng in about 1990. A Mobil manager then asked the obvious question: was the company selling transport or selling fuel? Gazelle Transport became Islands Petroleum.

Two patterns took hold in these years. The first was people. Over the years Paul employed about twenty Malaysians in PNG, many of them Bahá'ís, and in his words they "formed part of the backbone of our company". Shahin joined in Rabaul in 1989 and over 37 years managed Rabaul, Arawa, Kavieng, Alotau, Madang and Port Moresby. He is now a director. Rajah built the Kimbe branch from a vacant block between Shell and BP, with a borrowed BP trailer.

Companies are not really built from tanks, trucks and ships... They are built by people who stay.

The second was diversification around the core. Noel's shipping venture with a German volunteer passed to Paul. The company bought the old Burns Philp wharf in Rabaul and at its peak ran five tugs and five barges, with a salvage sideline. Paul

kept each venture in its own company, a rule he still follows. Later he would describe selling fuel, compared with his father's many ventures, as "an extraordinarily focused business model".

Then came Bougainville's crisis. From 1989 married staff were evacuated, the company's Malaysian staff faced deportation threats, and the business on the island collapsed. The last transactions at Loloho were on 4 June 1990. Depot manager Jacob swapped the cash for cocoa cheques and got them out by sea mail on the Cosmaris. He escaped to Rabaul and became the company's chief mechanic.

Jacob became the Bank of Loloho.

In 1991 Paul went back with a government-escorted business party, by Iroquois helicopter and armoured Land Rover, to see his customers.

5. The mountain wakes (1994)

In the early hours of Sunday 18 September 1994 the earthquakes began. They continued for about 27 hours. Then Tavurvur and Vulcan erupted together, and Rabaul was buried. Paul moved a 16,000-litre tanker over Tunnel Hill to fuel the emergency vehicles, then led a convoy of forty or fifty people north to a logging camp at Put Put. He arrived with five unaccompanied children who had been thrown onto his truck by their mothers.

The Bluetts lost their two-storey home on Grove Street. In all, Paul lost "three houses, three flats and three shops. I nearly went broke."

The fuel depot survived. It stood near the wharf, in the corridor between the two volcanoes. Mobil chartered a flight out of Tokua for women and children. Paul stayed. He took ABC correspondent Sean Dorney through the checkpoints into the ruined town, and stood on the pumice-covered wharf.

I had no authority whatsoever to open harbours, but nobody else seemed to be doing it.

Ione remembers that the fuel trucks were back on the road within days, keeping the lights on through generators. The next day Paul drove to a new office in Kokopo, which became the company's base for the next three decades.

The eruption also brought an unexpected turn in the Mobil relationship. Mobil's head office took back control of the Rabaul facility and bought back the stock. The replacement manager then paid his own hotel bill by writing an order in the company's docket book. Before long the depot was handed back, and later Mobil sold it to the company outright.

History is full of great turning points. Ours just happened to come on our own letterhead.

In January 1995 Paul and his German partner Jurgen took one of the company's tugs across the harbour and climbed the still-erupting Tavurvur. Rabaul was finished as a town, but not as a home. The family moved to Nonga, then to "Camelot" on Kenabot

Hill above Kokopo. Oliver and Nathan were already at the Maxwell Bahá'í school on Vancouver Island and received the news by fax.

6. Building the network (1995-2005)

The years after the volcano were years of steady expansion from a new base. Paul's working style was frugal and incremental:

He spent on tanks, trucks and construction, and on little else.

He kept each venture in its own company.

He rented rather than bought wherever he could: "it's the use, not the ownership that's important".

Oliver describes a business "run on a shoestring", where marginal depots cut grass around town to pay their way. He also describes Paul fighting Mobil for a proper distributor commission.

The company reached beyond the islands. By the late 1990s it had a first presence in Port Moresby. In the early 2000s, pushed hard by one of its Malaysian managers, it began supplying Highlands traders. Until then it had been "coastal only". In the 2007 Oro floods, the same improvising spirit kept fuel moving when Cyclone Guba took out the bridges. The town built an earthen wharf at Goma, and the company bought 400,000 litres off a passing barge.

No manual had prepared us for this.

The defining deal of the period came in 2003. ExxonMobil was leaving small, high-risk, low-return operations in small countries. It offered to sell the three terminals Islands Petroleum already ran, plus Alotau and Popondetta. Paul called his eldest son Oliver, then an accountant in Gladstone, and Oliver joined in August 2003 to help negotiate. Mobil's approvals took two years. The deal was done on vendor finance, and the company traded the depots for eighteen months while the titles transferred. It completed in 2005 with a combined volume of about 35 million litres. These were small, run-down depots that a global major no longer wanted to run; the family saw what they could become.

Nathan has called it the first acquisition and "the beginning of the modern era".

7. The modern company (2005-2019)

From 2005 the company grew at double-digit rates for more than twenty years in a row. In 2006 Nathan joined as IT manager. At the time the company had five locations, dial-up connections and stand-alone systems. In 2008 Mobil offered the lubricants distributorship on condition the company opened warehouses in Madang, Lae and Port Moresby. Paul again insisted on fuel as well, and the company had its first mainland depots.

Its model was that of a distributor that adds value. It owned few assets and gave customers credit, service and reliability. In Nathan's words: "we said yes to

everything… our trucks were there at 6am." Behind the scenes the company professionalised:

A Pronto ERP project ran from 2009 and went live at the first site in 2014, replacing the in-house accounting system.

Paul's view of it changed after a failed 2010 merger with a similar-sized independent.

External HR managers came in from 2014.

The company also began building its own infrastructure:

About 2016: a terminal on a back-filled swamp in Lae, alongside the Mobil and Shell depots, holding about 20 million litres. Lae is now the company's biggest market.

About 2020-21: two hectares opposite the new main wharf in Port Moresby, the Sasiva site at Motukea, bought from Peter Maxtone-Graham.

These years also brought change in the family. Paul and Ione's marriage ended. In 2013 Paul married Kavitha, a Malaysian Bahá'í whose brother Thiagan had come to PNG in 1989 as a volunteer and become one of the company's managers. Kavitha herself had worked in the company's depots in Rabaul, Kavieng and Alotau. From 2014 she was Paul's PA and then ran marketing.

I thought I had employed my wife, but it soon became clear that she was managing me.

8. Giving back

Generosity runs through the company's story. It began with Bahá'í hospitality on Rabaul verandahs and grew into a corporate commitment. Paul hosted seventy Canadian sailors for dinner when their tall ship refuelled at the Rabaul wharf, and 140 villagers for State of Origin in his lounge at Nonga. Other examples:

2006: the company gave K5,000 to build a library in the Nakanai area with its customer Hargy Oil Palms.

Since about 2016: a drum of fuel every month to Donna's Haus Pikinini orphanage in Wau.

A table at the Don Bosco opera fundraiser for rural maternity facilities.

In 2017 Paul and Kavitha started the Colour Run under the We Are One Foundation.

Then, in 2017, we started the Colour Run, and our charity work truly began.

By its tenth year the Islands Petroleum Colour Run drew about 10,000 people in Port Moresby. It had spread to Kavieng, Kimbe and, in 2026, Popondetta, where company staff delivered the drums and colour powder themselves. The Foundation now has its own small board and office at Rangeview, near the Bahá'í House of Worship.

Ten thousand people laughing, walking, dancing and proving that sometimes the healthiest thing you can do isn't chase a personal best - it's simply turn up.

9. The next chapter (2019-2026)

In late 2019 Paul, then 65, began to formalise the leadership. Nathan was named chief executive, Oliver chief financial officer and Craig chief operating officer. The company took on its first external adviser and began building a board, which now has an independent chair. Paul's stated strategy is to replace employee directors over time with independent ones "so that there's a proper board fiduciary accountability".

The numbers tell the story of the modern era:

From about 35 million litres in 2005 to about 460 million litres today.

About 700 staff, some of them with more than thirty years' service.

One year of 40% growth when a competitor left the market.

In 2025-26 the head office began moving from Kokopo to Port Moresby, deliberately, one person at a time. Paul joked that he was "moving head office to Moresby after only 46 years - not rushing these decisions." In 2026 the company commissioned its own low-sulphur diesel tank in Lae.

We'd started with shells, borrowed money and a generous seller - and built something very special.

10. What the family has stood for

The Bahá'í Faith is the thread that runs through this whole story. It took Noel and Margaret to the Highlands, it brought Rodney Hancock to Rabaul, it shaped who the company hired, and it sits behind much of how the family gives back. Several Bahá'í principles show up again and again in how the family and the business have actually behaved.

The oneness of humanity

The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens. - Bahá'u'lláh

The Bluetts arrived in Goroka and spent their first Easter in a Highlands village rather than at the golf club. Paul took PNG citizenship. The company was built by Papua New Guineans, Malaysians, Australians and others working side by side, and many of them stayed for thirty years or more.

Work done in a spirit of service

In Bahá'í teaching, work done in a spirit of service is a form of worship. The family took that literally. Paul held seven jobs before he left school, the company said yes to any honest work that might earn a kina, and the Colour Run and the We Are One Foundation turned the company's success outward into the community.

Trustworthiness

Every handover in the business's early history was made on trust: no deposit, no interest, vendor finance, to someone the seller knew. Paul paid John Mills out six months early. Jacob carried the Loloho takings out as cocoa cheques. A business built on that kind of trust has to keep earning it.

Education

Paul was sent to a Bahá'í school in India at ten. Oliver and Nathan went to the Maxwell Bahá'í school in Canada. Paul's hope is that every one of his children earns a degree, and the company has invested steadily in professional systems and outside expertise as it grew.

The equality of women and men

Margaret was a pioneer in her own right. Ione ran the office in the Rabaul years while raising the family. Kavitha ran marketing and now leads the Foundation's work.

Consultation

The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. - 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Bahá'í consultation asks people to speak frankly, listen fully, and then stand behind the group's decision. As the company moves from a founder-led business to one run by a board and a leadership team, this may be the principle that matters most for the next chapter.

How the business has worked

Alongside the faith, a set of business habits has held from the first truck to the four-hundred-millionth litre:

Grow through relationships. Almost every step forward, from Bougainville to the 2005 Mobil purchase, came from a partner who trusted the family to deliver.

Hold firm on what makes it work. Paul would cart fuel for Mobil only if he could sell it too, in 1985 and again in 2008.

Grow step by step, within your means. Spend on tanks, trucks and people who deliver; be careful with everything else.

Keep each venture in its own company. One venture's trouble never sinks the others.

Value the use, not the ownership. Rent where you can, buy where it is strategic, as with the Lae swamp and the Port Moresby wharf block.

Keep the people who stay. "Companies are not really built from tanks, trucks and ships... They are built by people who stay."

Say yes, and turn up. The trucks were there at 6am.

11. Turning points and their lessons

1964-65 - Noel and Margaret leave a thriving Canberra life to pioneer in PNG

What came of it: The family puts down roots in PNG; the children grow up working

The lesson: Purpose can matter more than security

1979-80 - Noel chooses Paul to take over Gazelle Agencies and Anisa

What came of it: Paul and Ione move to Rabaul with one and a half companies and an overdraft

The lesson: How a business is handed on shapes everything after it

1985 - Paul tells Mobil he will cart fuel only if he can sell it too

What came of it: Islands Petroleum's fuel business is born

The lesson: Know what makes the numbers work, and hold to it

1985-90 - Recruit Bahá'í managers from Malaysia for the regional depots

What came of it: A loyal core of managers who stay for decades

The lesson: The right people matter more than the right assets

1990 - Bougainville is lost to the crisis

What came of it: Staff get out safely; Jacob becomes "the Bank of Loloho"

The lesson: Look after people first; the business can be rebuilt

1994 - Paul stays in Rabaul after the eruption to keep fuel moving

What came of it: The depot survives, the company relocates to Kokopo, and Mobil later sells the depot to the family

The lesson: In a crisis, the one who keeps turning up earns the trust

2003-05 - Buy five depots from ExxonMobil on vendor finance; bring Oliver home to help

What came of it: The start of the modern company

The lesson: The next generation can be the difference on the big deal

2008 - Take the lubricants distributorship on condition of fuel on the mainland

What came of it: The first mainland depots; Lae becomes the biggest market

The lesson: Every opportunity is a chance to negotiate the next one

2009-14 - Invest in a proper ERP system and outside HR

What came of it: A company that can run at scale

The lesson: Growth eventually needs systems, not just the founder

2017 - Start the Colour Run

What came of it: Ten thousand people a year; the Foundation

The lesson: Giving back can become part of the company's identity

2019 - Name Nathan CEO, Oliver CFO and Craig COO; begin building a board

What came of it: The founder-led company starts to become a governed one

The lesson: Formal roles are the start of succession, not the end of it

2025-26 - Move head office to Port Moresby, one person at a time

What came of it: Islands Petroleum is no longer just of the islands

The lesson: Big changes can be made gently

12. The chapter still to be written

Every family business reaches the point where the founder's vision has to become something the whole family can carry. In 1980 the vision was simple: make a living, serve the community, and say yes to anything that might earn a kina. In 2026 the company is a national distributor with about 700 staff, a board with an independent chair, and a head office in the capital.

The next part of the story will be written by the family together. It turns on a few questions that no document can answer for them:

Which of the family's values should guide the business for the next twenty years, and how will they be kept alive?

How will the family, the board and the leadership team make decisions together, and work through disagreement?

What role will each member of the next generation play: in the business, in its ownership, in the Foundation, or alongside it?

What does a fair outcome look like, for those who work in the business and those who do not?

These are the conversations I hope to have with each of you, one at a time and then together.

Appendix A - Timeline

1951-52 - Noel Bluett and Margaret Mason meet, become Bahá'ís, marry in Sydney (27 Sep 1952)

1953-54 - Michael born 8 May 1953; Paul born 9 May 1954, Leeton NSW

1954 - Rodney Hancock arrives in PNG as a Bahá'í pioneer, starts a customs and transport agency in Rabaul with two trucks

1958 - Noel Treasurer of the Australian Bahá'í National Assembly; accountancy practice and Civic Co-op Building Society in Canberra

early 1960s - Tony Saunders, Hancock's employee, incorporates the agency as Gazelle Agencies

1963 - Noel in Haifa for the first election of the Universal House of Justice; family decides to pioneer

Oct 1964 - Paul (10) sails on the SS Himalaya to the New Era Bahá'í school, Panchgani, India

Feb 1965 - Noel and Margaret arrive in Goroka; Noel first Executive Officer of the PNG Coffee Marketing Board

1965-71 - Paul's teenage jobs in Goroka (Steamies, PMV driving over the Daulo Pass)

c.1971 - Noel becomes manager of New Guinea Coffee Brokers

late 1960s / early 1970s - John Mills buys Gazelle Agencies from Tony Saunders on vendor terms

1973 - Coffee-futures losses at the export company while Noel is in Israel; Noel loses his job; family moves to Lae (laundry, shells, trade goods)

9 May 1974 - Noel and John Mills form Anisa (commercial shell export), Rabaul and Lae

Sep 1975 - PNG Independence; Paul applies for citizenship (granted c.1978 per Paul)

1976 (or early 1977) - Paul and Ione marry after finishing degrees in Hobart; Paul had worked at Coopers in Hobart

1977 - Oliver born; Paul takes a two-year accounting contract in Lae (Dec 1977, Oliver about six months old)

2 Feb 1979 - Nathan born in Lae

late 1979 - John Mills offers Gazelle Agencies and his half of Anisa; Noel picks Paul

4 Jan 1980 - Paul and Ione move to Rabaul; takeover effective 1 Jan 1980, no deposit, no interest; Paul also Government Auctioneer for the Islands Region

1983 - Customs clearance work for Mobil lubricants begins

Oct 1983 - Stage 2 volcano alert in Rabaul; investment frozen for eleven years

end 1984 - Vendor finance to John Mills paid off (c.4.5 years)

11 Nov 1984 - Jason born at Vunapope

1985 - Mobil asks for Bougainville fuel cartage; Paul insists on selling fuel too; new company (Kieta Transport), Malaysian manager Baljit ("Bill"); fuel sales into Buka begin

c.1985-87 - Bougainville volume roughly doubles; Paul's name at Mobil as a "business doubler"

25 May 1987 - Julian born at Vunapope

1988 - Mobil offers the Rabaul terminal sales desk; Gazelle Transport formed - "the real beginning"

1989 - Shahin joins in Rabaul; Thiagan arrives as a Bahá'í volunteer; Kimbe depot (c.1989); Bougainville crisis begins

c.1990 - Kavieng depot; Gazelle Transport renamed Islands Petroleum at Mobil's suggestion

4 Jun 1990 - Last transactions at the Loloho depot; Jacob ships the cash out as cocoa cheques

1991 - Paul returns to Bougainville with government-escorted business party

1 Apr 1993 - Eliot born at Vunapope

18-19 Sep 1994 - Rabaul eruption: Bluett home and nine properties lost; Mobil depot by the wharf survives; trucks delivering within days; office moves to Kokopo

1994-95 - Mobil head office takes back the Rabaul depot, then hands it back and later sells it to the company

Jan 1995 - Paul and German partner Jurgen climb the still-erupting Tavurvur by company tug

late 1990s - First presence in Port Moresby

early 2000s - Highlands distributors set up, driven by a Malaysian manager

2003 - ExxonMobil offers to sell five terminals ("3 plus 2", incl. Alotau and Popondetta); Oliver joins (Aug 2003) to help negotiate

2005 - Purchase completes after two years of Mobil approvals; combined volume c.35m litres

2006 - K5,000 library at Nakanai with Hargy Oil Palms; Nathan joins as IT manager (Sep)

2007 - Cyclone Guba: earthen wharf at Goma, 400,000 L bought off a passing barge

2008 - Mobil lubricants distributorship; fuel restarted in Madang, Lae and Port Moresby - first mainland depots

2009-14 - Pronto ERP project replaces the in-house system; first site live 2014

2010 - Attempted merger with a similar-sized independent

2013 - Paul marries Kavitha (Cairns)

2014 - Kavitha joins as Paul's PA, then marketing; Kokopo house

c.2016 - Lae terminal built on reclaimed swamp, c.20m litres

2017 - First Colour Run (We Are One Foundation)

late 2019 - Nathan named CEO, Oliver CFO, Craig COO; first external adviser (Tom Cordukes)

c.2020-21 - Two hectares opposite the Port Moresby main wharf (Sasiva/Motukea)

c.2024 - 40% growth year after a competitor's exit

2025-26 - Head office moves to Port Moresby, one person at a time

2026 - Lae low-sulphur ("Hi-Speed") diesel tank; c.460m litres, c.700 staff; independent directors joining the board; 10th Colour Run

Appendix B - People

Noel Bluett (1930-2014) - Paul's father; accountant, Bahá'í pioneer, first Executive Officer of the PNG Coffee Marketing Board, co-founder of Anisa. Era: 1951-2014

Margaret Bluett (1933-2026) - Paul's mother; nurse, Bahá'í pioneer, author ("Margaret Tebele"), died 21 June 2026 aged 93. Era: 1951-2026

Michael Bluett (1953-1983) - Paul's elder brother; Lae lawyer. Era: to 1983

Greg Bluett (1958-2012) - Paul's brother; TV cameraman; bought the first Bougainville truck. Era: 1980s

Paul Bluett (b. 1954) - Founder; chartered accountant; general manager, later director. Era: 1980-

Ione Bluett (née Salter) - Paul's first wife; ran the office administration in the Rabaul years. Era: 1976- c.2012

Oliver Bluett (b. 1977) - Eldest son; joined Aug 2003 for the Mobil purchase; depot and operations manager; CFO. Era: 2003-

Nathan Bluett (b. 1979) - Second son; IT manager 2006; CEO from late 2019. Era: 2006-

Jason, Julian, Eliot - Paul's younger sons (b. 1984, 1987, 1993). Era: -

Kavitha (Kavi) Bluett - Paul's second wife (m. 2013); PA, marketing; co-founder of the Colour Run; runs the Foundation's projects. Era: 2014-

Rodney Hancock - Bahá'í pioneer; founded the Rabaul customs and transport agency (1954). Era: 1954-1960s

Tony Saunders - Hancock's employee; incorporated Gazelle Agencies. Era: 1960s

John Mills - Owner of Gazelle Agencies; co-founder of Anisa; sold to Paul 1980. Era: 1970s-1980

Elena ("Aunty Helen") and Habib Yaganegi - Accountant (1980 on) and customs agent. Era: 1980-

Bob Gleason - Mobil, Lae; agreed the Bougainville fuel concession. Era: 1985

Baljit ("Bill") - First Malaysian manager, Kieta/Loloho. Era: 1985- c.1989

Jacob - Loloho depot manager; later chief mechanic. Era: to 1990

Shahin - Joined Rabaul 1989; manager across six branches; director. Era: 1989-

Rajah - Built and ran the Kimbe branch for 30 years. Era: c.1989-

Thiagan - Kavitha's brother; Bahá'í volunteer 1989; long-serving manager. Era: 1989-

Jurgen - German business partner (shipping, 1990s). Era: 1990s

Craig - COO from late 2019. Era: 2019-

Tom Cordukes - First external adviser (2019); later a mentor. Era: 2019-

1951

Mum n dad

Mum

How Dad Met Mum

On 21 February 1951, my mother, Margaret Mason, walked out of a Sydney cinema after seeing Mr. Music. She was 18, two months into her nursing training, and wondering what to do with the rest of her day.

Along came a tall, skinny bloke with long hair, an orange shirt and purple trousers. He fell into step beside her and asked, “Would you like to attend another movie with me?”

That was my father, Noel Bluett. He’d spotted Mum in the cinema. She hadn’t noticed him at all, which I find hard to believe given the trousers.

Mum said yes. Dad’s next question was, “Are you a Catholic?”

“No,” said Mum. “I am an atheist.”

“Have you ever heard of the Bahá’í Faith?”

As opening lines go, Dad had a style all his own.

Mum had been nursing through long night shifts and had seen patients die. She’d already been thinking about what happens after death, so the conversation took hold. They spent much of her three days off together. Dad even missed the last ferry back to Sydney one night and slept at the Manly terminal.

By day three, he’d had a haircut, put on a jacket and tie, and packed a cut lunch. They went to the Mitchell Library, had lunch in the Botanic Gardens, and then he took her home to meet his mother.

My grandmother, caught in her house dress and slippers, invited Mum in for a cup of tea. Then came her first question.

“Are you a Catholic?”

Mum wrote in her memoir, “Very strange family – these Bluetts – what was the problem?”

Dad later told Mum he’d already decided, back in the cinema, that she was the girl he wanted to marry. Mum took a little longer to make up her own mind. She read about the Bahá’í Faith and decided she believed in it, but kept that to herself at first. She reckoned Dad, being a man who loved a stage, would announce it to everyone before she’d had a chance to meet the other Bahá’ís on her own terms.

They married in September 1952. By 1965 they were in Goroka. They raised six children and were married for 62 years.

Whenever I think of all that came after, I come back to Mum walking out of that cinema, wondering what to do with the rest of her day. She certainly got more than she bargained for. And thank goodness she gave the bloke in the purple trousers a chance.

1952

Maxtone Grahams 3 generations

Warawahgi coffee plantation tragedy boarding school mate business mate



Peter Maxtone-Graham

On Monday we drove past Watawaghi plantation near Minj, where Peter Maxtone-Graham began planting coffee in the 1950s, a young man born in 1927 who somehow found his way to the Highlands and became part of its history.

Peter was instrumental in forming the Farmers and Settlers Association, an organisation that was very much part of the Goroka world I later grew up in.

He also married into the Wahgi community. The bride price for Mungo’s mother included a steel axe — a wonderfully Highlands detail from an era when a good steel axe was not just a tool but a very valuable piece of wealth.

Then tragedy. Peter drowned in the Waghi River when his son Mungo was only seven.

Mungo was sent away to board at Trinity Grammar School in Sydney, and by one of those peculiar twists of life, when I eventually arrived there myself, Mungo was already on the swimming team.

Butterfly was his forte.

My contribution to Australian swimming was rather less glamorous: I had the job of waking Mungo and the rest of the team at six every morning.

No alarm clocks in those days. Apparently I was the alarm clock.

Mungo could also swim freestyle and played very good rugby. He was best mates with Peter Schmalkuche, who was also one of my best mates, so our lives kept circling each other without either of us having any idea how many more circles were still to come.

Mungo later had a son.

Naturally, they called him Peter.

Years later I bought two hectares of land from Peter at Motukea for our Port Moresby depot, Sasiva. We did the business, but oddly enough we had never actually met.

Until Friday night.

I walked into the POM Yacht Club during the Joker Draw and there he was — Peter Maxtone-Graham, grandson of the man whose plantation I had driven past only four days earlier, and son of the boy I used to wake for swimming practice more than half a century ago.

Peter bought me a rather enormous cigar and we sat there exchanging our life histories over the noise of the Joker Draw.

It was less a first meeting than a reunion between two people who had never met.

I became so absorbed in the story that I completely missed the Broncos winning.

That takes some doing.

Sadly, Mungo died before I ever had the chance to meet him again. But sitting with his son on Friday night, hearing the stories and recognising that familiar glint in the eye, I couldn’t help thinking that grandfather Peter, Mungo and young Peter all seem to have inherited the same mischievous streak.

From a steel axe in the Wahgi, to a boarding-school swimming team in Sydney, to two hectares at Motukea, and finally a large cigar at the POM Yachtie — somehow the Maxtone-Grahams and my life have been crossing paths for more than half a century.

PNG does that.

It makes a very large country feel remarkably small.

“Dark Brown is the river” written by John Maxtone Graham about peter but the character has a fictional name but broad details are correct probably allows the author poetic licence on small details

Photo: Peter Maxtone-Graham and me at the POM Yachtie — meeting for the first time, and catching up on about 70 years of shared history.

1953-1983

Michael

Lost my first brother

Michael

Michael and I were born on consecutive Mother’s Days, which sounds very sweet. But spare a thought for him: at barely three months old, his mother was pregnant again, her milk dried up and her affections were suddenly divided. He had every right to be a little grumpy with his younger brother.

Trouble seemed to find Michael—or perhaps Michael went looking for it.

When he was about three, we were sitting in the family car on our steep driveway. He was told, very clearly, “Don’t touch the handbrake.” Naturally, he did. We rolled backwards across the road and came to rest against the neighbour’s brick letterbox.

Another time, I watched him climb our willow tree and put his full weight on a branch that was clearly too fragile to hold him. He ended up hanging upside down with a broken leg.

Playing in a quarry, with Michael at the top and me at the bottom, he managed to hit me on the head with a rock. The two stitches I received may have been fair payment for stealing our mother’s milk.

In India, we stood on opposite ends of a seesaw—an activity requiring trust, balance and brotherly cooperation. Michael jumped off sideways while I was at the top. I came down with a sprained arm and our already fragile brotherhood suffered another strain.

Occasionally, however, his accident-prone nature worked in my favour. He once took Dad’s company car to deliver trade goods stored under our house in West Goroka and rolled it. There wasn’t much damage, but Michael promptly did a runner to Rabaul. I obtained my licence almost overnight and, at sixteen, took over the job—driving the LandCruiser ute, selling cargo and carrying passengers.

Dad later bought a Suzuki 125 motorcycle for missionary work. It had a special low gear for climbing hills. I took Michael pillion to Arufa, on the Bena side of Goroka. At the bottom of a ravine, I told him to get off.

“Why?”

“You’ll find out halfway up.”

He stayed aboard. We hit a bump, the front wheel went vertical and Michael rolled backwards down the hill. I laughed. Michael did not.

Mum eventually became concerned about him and sent him to India to find a wife. He did rather better than that: he married, built a house, bought Alison Cassels legal practice and became a father.

In 1983, Michael and I travelled together to Israel, representing the Bahá’í community of Papua New Guinea at the election of the Universal House of Justice. Afterwards, he returned to Bombay to stay with his wife’s family.

Trying to save on hotel bills, he decided to fly overnight to Pakistan and Kashmir, returning the following night. Deep-vein thrombosis was not widely understood then. After three consecutive nights spent flying, a clot travelled to his heart and caused a fatal infarction.

In his drawer they found a carefully prepared sheet headed with instructions on what to do in the event of his death. That was Michael: sometimes impulsive, frequently accident-prone, yet thoughtful enough to prepare everyone for the one accident from which he would not return.

At Mum’s funeral recently, I met Michael’s granddaughter. She is part of the life that continued from his own, although sadly he never lived to meet her.

For all our childhood battles, broken bones, stitches and strained brotherhood, he was my brother—and I remember him with affection, gratitude and love.

Michael’s photo taken on 13/8/79 ..today ..when greg turned 21

He would have been 68 today

Lost both

Lae botanical gardens

1958-2012

Greg about himself

A little bit about me says greg

“A Little Bit About Me

(Greg Bluett)

I was born in the late 1950s in Canberra, the capital of Australia. I had 2 older brothers, 2 sisters, 9 kittens, a fish pond in the backyard and a caravan at the side of our red brick 3 bedroom home. My father was a stressed out former musician accountant and my darling mother a housewife. Life seemed pretty good to me, we had a brand new Ford Falcon station wagon with imitation timber panels parked out front.

My parents were religious do-gooders and we often had oddly dressed no hope chess players around the house who needed somewhere to sleep for the weekend and ended up staying for 3 months.

Our weekends were spent bringing the Word of God to fringe dwellers on the outskirts of town.

When I turned 6 years old and outgrown my tri-cycle, my parents enthusiasm to change the world had us packing our bags and heading for the cannibal highlands of New Guinea. Oh, what an adventure, 3 days drive inland on the dirt road from hell and a mile above sea level. All the comforts we had become used to, like a fridge and a bed, had to be ordered in advance and flown in from ‘down south’. When we arrived I was hospital bed-ridden by a strange tropical virus. My hair started falling out and the only thing I could keep in my stomach was warm milk. This actually had hilarious consequences later on for my primary school principal who grabbed me by the hair in an effort to discipline me.

My father’s new boss offered to put us in a nice hotel until we were settled, but my parents were detached and had given away all our worldly goods when we left the great south land, so they unanimously decided we would all sleep on inflatable mattresses on an empty wooden floor in a flat with a view of downtown Goroka from the concrete back verandah. An exciting place circled by native villages and populated by 2,500 white Australians, the valley was surrounded by huge mountains and crisscrossed by fast cold rocky rivers with strange names like Zokozoi and Kamaliki.

It was relatively safe as the Australian administration ruled with an iron hand and other white-man’s magic, like policemen with standard issue .303 calibre rifles and Holden panel vans. We would walk across the grass airstrip every morning to school, and our weekends were often spent bringing the Word of God to villages on the outskirts of town.

These were good times for me, I picked up the language fairly quickly and spent my spare time exploring coffee plantations with bare feet and my new friend, Moses. Because of my home life I didn't see the problem with him having black skin, to some at my school this made me a 'kanaka lover' and they threw stones at me. Our excursions into the villages on the weekend also caused problems for my parents; they invited local people into our home, when these people sang their songs, the white people became afraid and my parents were labelled as troublemakers. The polite society world of golfing weekends and flower shows rejected my Mum and Dad, so eventually we moved to the coast, a bigger town called Lae, these were the 1970s and attitudes were changing. Nobody noticed us much, and our weekends were often spent bringing the Word of God to villages on the outskirts of town.

———

So I went off to boarding school in Australia and up until this point I was no trouble at school, labelled by my favourite teacher as "gifted and destined for great things….!"

Mine had been a sheltered life and the Church of England Grammar School in the western suburbs of Sydney seemed tough, we ate, slept and studied in a uniformed environment of 1200 men and boys, no women except the Matron in starched skirts at the Sick Bay who had long ago lost her feminine qualities to the onset of menopause. Her remedy for every ailment was Dencorub and hot water.

"Sister, Sister, I'm terribly homesick!!"

"Here you go, rub on some Dencorub and have a nice hot bath."

Our Tuesday and Sunday nights were spent in the School Chapel bringing the Word of God to us.

Our teachers were a breed of their own, they were not young and they were not attractive. My mathematics teacher had formed a new identity after a failed career in Hitler's secret police. He spoke with a thick German accent, had a buzz cut square head and could hit any boy in the room with the wooden duster, spinning around in slow motion and hurling it straight at the forehead, no wonder maths still gives me a headache.

Our French teacher had jumped out of a burning building in World War 2 and consequently walked with an extreme limp. He spoke through his nose so as we repeated our French vowels over and over, we mocked him, and the classroom sounded more like a sheep paddock than a sophisticated learning institute.

After convincing my mother that all the boys in my dorm had criminal records and the walls were inhabited by funnel web spiders very common in Sydney back then, my parents decided an expensive private boarding school education was not for me. I was flown back home and enrolled in a public mixed race high school. I had begun to call New Guinea home, and although I knew deep down we couldn't stay there, I loved it.

My education did not run smoothly from then on and I was in trouble a lot, eventually expelled before the end of Grade 10 and prepared to study at the school of hard knocks. I sold used cars, jewellery, chemicals, even planted tomatoes and trained horses. But I had discovered my true love long before I realised my professional career was not going so well. I rode my first motorcycle when I was just 12 and a half years old. Although it was a clapped out old postman's bike, a step-through scooter with 3 gears, no clutch and not even any real power, it slammed me into a bush and took off without me, roaring through the coffee trees. But I knew I was going to tame that angry beast.

Every spare moment from then on was devoted to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, they say beauty is only skin deep but I lost a lot of skin. I began to get noticed and suddenly companies wanted me to ride their latest brand new shiny motorcycles.

From then on I spent my weekends teaching the Fear of God to my parents …… and to villagers on the outskirts of town."

Ps greg wrote this about his own life

Greg Bluett 13/81958 to 12/6/2012

1958-2012

Another tribute to greg

Loved him

Another Tribute to Greg — From His Brother

How do you pay tribute to Greg when half the people here have a story about him that sounds completely made up, but is somehow true?

As his brother, I can assure you that Greg was not born normal. He arrived smiling, which should have been our first warning sign.

As a little kid he was quiet, sitting there watching the rest of us like a spectator at Wimbledon, head swinging left and right trying to work out which sibling was causing the most trouble. Eventually he stopped watching and decided to compete.

Once he started talking, he never really stopped. Greg could fill a room, a car, a television studio, or an entire pub with conversation. Usually all at once.

Danger fascinated him from an early age. Most children see a hot stove and think, “That looks dangerous.”

Greg thought, “I wonder how it works?”

Most children sleep in a bunk bed.

Greg built a parachute from a handkerchief and marbles and jumped off one.

Most children kept their fingers away from closing doors.

Greg tested the theory personally.

To be fair, he spent his whole life testing theories personally.

Motorbikes were his first true love. The police were his second.

The relationship between Greg and the police lasted decades and was remarkably consistent. Greg would do something spectacularly silly. The police would attempt to catch him. Greg would consider that a challenge.

At one stage he was apparently impossible to catch while actually riding a motorbike. The police eventually concluded the only way to apprehend him was to wait until he was asleep.

When they finally locked him up for a day, he phoned Mum and said:

“Mum, you’ve got to get me out of here. This place is full of rascals.”

That may be the only recorded occasion in history where the most dangerous man in the watch house complained about the company.

Greg had a complicated relationship with authority.

Teachers struggled with him.

Police struggled with him.

Neighbours struggled with him.

His father certainly struggled with him.

The family home narrowly survived several encounters with Greg’s enthusiasm for fire, electricity and engineering.

At various times he set fire to things, electrified things, built things onto the roof, and nearly burned the place down.

Dad reached the point where any unexplained event in Papua New Guinea was automatically blamed on Greg.

There’d be a blackout somewhere across town and Dad would say,

“I can’t help feeling Greg caused it.”

And honestly, there was usually enough evidence to justify the suspicion.

When Greg wasn’t terrorising authority figures, he was jumping motorcycles through fire, over oil drums, over cars, or into situations sensible people actively avoid.

While most of us spent weekends trying not to get injured, Greg charged admission to watch him do it.

Then he discovered television and cameras.

Some people become cameramen because they enjoy photography.

Greg became a cameraman because it allowed him to legally stand in dangerous places.

Volcano erupting?

Greg was there.

Riot?

Greg was there.

Helicopter flying too close to something alarming?

Greg was hanging out the side filming it.

He had a gift for finding the centre of the action and then moving ten metres closer.

He loved Papua New Guinea with all his heart. It wasn’t simply where he lived; it shaped who he was. The landscapes, the people, the adventures, the friendships—it was woven into him.

Wherever he later lived, part of Greg never left PNG.

The remarkable thing beneath all the stories, though, was his heart.

He could be impatient with fools, but he was endlessly generous to people who needed help.

He was loyal.

He was compassionate.

He was the first to show up when someone was in trouble.

And he loved deeply.

Nothing revealed that more than Rebecca.

Anyone who saw Greg with Rebecca saw a completely different side of him.

The daredevil disappeared.

The stunt rider disappeared.

The police target disappeared.

What remained was a father utterly devoted to his daughter.

He adored her.

And he wasn’t subtle about it.

Most fathers tell their daughters they love them.

Greg produced annual cinematic masterpieces to prove it.

The budgets appeared to increase every year.

By the final instalment, I suspect several Hollywood producers were feeling threatened.

In recent years he found happiness with Gaby.

The time they had together was far too short, but it was obvious to everyone that she brought him joy, companionship and love, and for that our family will always be grateful.

In his final days, even as cancer took so much from him, it could not take away the things that mattered most.

The love of his family.

The love of his friends.

His gratitude.

His humour.

His spirit.

Even when he could no longer speak, he was still communicating, still expressing love, still thinking about others.

That was Greg.

Right to the end.

As brothers we shared a lifetime of adventures, arguments, laughter and stories.

Some of those stories can be told in public.

Others remain subject to legal advice.

But what I will remember most is his enormous enthusiasm for life.

Greg never stood on the sidelines.

He rode into life at full speed, usually on one wheel, occasionally through a ring of fire, frequently ignoring good advice, and somehow making the journey unforgettable for everyone around him.

We loved him.

We worried about him.

We laughed at him.

And we will miss him enormously.

Goodbye Greg.

Try not to reorganise Heaven too much before the rest of us get there.

PS At Greg’s funeral I paid tribute to the PNG police minister Moses Maladina in attendance “ ..that the police had finally caught up with him ..”

PPS Greg’s and our beloved mum Margaret is in her final stages of life so this will be my last story for a while.

I fly to Cairns from Port Moresby today to join the remaining siblings by her bedside.

1958

Greg’s humorous story

Autobiography

Brother Greg wrote a story for a Lae school reunion in oz a few years ago
He passed in 2012 and I reproduce it here in full as a memory for his birthday
Full of humor, colour and his view of the truth
“I was bom in the late 1950s in Canberra, the capital of Australia. l had 2 older brothers, 2 sisters, 9 kittens, a fish pond in the backyard and a caravan at the side of our red brick, 3 bedroom home. My father was a stressed out former musician accountant and my darling mother a housewife. Life seemed pretty good to me, we had a brand new Ford Falcon station wagon with imitation timber panels parked out front.
My parents were religious do-gooders and we often had oddly dressed, no hoper, chess players around the house who needed somewhere to sleep for the weekend and ended up staying for 3 months.
Our weekends were spent bringing the Word of God to fringe dwellers on the outskirts of town.
When I turned 6 years old and outgrown my tri-cycle, my parents enthusiasm to change the world had us packing our bags and heading for the cannibal highlands of New Guinea. Oh, what an adventure, 3 days drive inland on the dirt road from hell and a mile above sea level.....all the comforts we had become used to like a fridge, and a bed, had to be ordered in advance and flown in from 'down south' When we arrived l was hospital bed ridden by a strange tropical virus My hair started falling out and the only thing l could keep in my stomach was warm milk. This actually had hilarious consequences later on for my primary school principal who grabbed me by the hair in an effort to discipline me.
My father's new boss offered to put us in a nice hotel until we were settled, but my parents were detached and had given away all our wordly goods when we left the great south land so they unanimously decide we would all sleep on inflatable mattresses on an empty wooden floor in a flat with a view of downtown Goroka from the concrete back verandah. An exciting place circled by native villages and populated by 2,500 white Australians, the valley was surrounded by huge mountains and crisscrossed by fast cold rocky rivers with strange names like zokosoi and Kamaliki .
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These were good times for I picked up the language fairly quickly and spent my spare time exploring coffee plantations with bare feet and my new friend, Moses. Because of home life, didn't see the problem with him having black skin to some at

my school this made me a kanaka lover' and they threw stones at me.Our excursions into the villages on the weekend also caused problems for my parents, they invited local people into our home, when these people sang their songs, the white people became afraid and my parents were labeled as troublemakers. The polite society world of golfing weekends and flower shows rejected my Mum and Dad, so eventually we moved to the coast, a bigger town called Lae these were the 1970s and attitudes were changing. Nobody noticed us much. and our weekends were often spent bringing the Word of God to villages on the outskirts of town.

So I went off to boarding school in Australia and up until this point I was no trouble at school, Labelled by my favourite teacher as "gifted and destined for great things. Mine had been a sheltered life and the Church of England Grammar school in the western suburbs of Sydney seems tough, we ate, slept and studied in a uniformed environment of 1200 men and boys, no women except the Matron in starched skirts at the Sick Bay who had long ago lost her feminine qualities to the onset of menopause. Her remedy for every ailment was Dencorub and hot water.
Our Tuesday and Sunday nights were spent in the School Chapel bringing the Word of God to us.
Our teachers were a breed of their own they were not young and they were not attractive. My mathematics teacher had formed a new identity after a failed career in Hitlers secret police. He spoke with a thick German accent. had a buzz cut square head and could hit any boy in the room with the wooden duster, spinning around in slow motion and hurling it straight at the forehead, no wonder maths still gives me a headache. Our French teacher had jumped out of a burning building in World War 2 and consequently walked with a limp. He spoke through his nose so as we repeated our French vowels over and over we mocked him, and the classroom sounded more like a sheep paddock than a sophisticated learning institute.
After convincing my mother that all the boys in my dorm had criminal records and the walls were inhabited by funnel web spiders very common in Sydney back then, my parents decided an expensive private boarding school education was not for me. l was flown back home and enrolled in a public mixed race high school. I had begun to call New Guinea home.and although I knew deep down we couldn't stay there, l loved it.
My education did not run smoothly from then on and I was in trouble a lot eventually expelled before the end of Grade 10 and prepared to study at the school of hard knocks. I sold used cars, jewelery, chemicals. even planted tomatoes and trained horses. But I had discovered my true love long before my professional career was not going so well. l rode my first motorcycle when l was just 12 and a half years old. Although it was a clapped out old postmans bike. a step through scooter with gears, no clutch and not even any real power. it slammed me into a bush and took off without me, roaring through the coffee trees but I knew l was going to tame that angry beast
Every spare moment from then on was devoted to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, they say beauty is only skin deep but I lost a lot of skin. I began to get noticed and suddenly companies wanted me to ride their latest brand new shiny motorcycles.

From then on I spent my weekend’s teaching the Fear of god to my parents on the outskirts of town

Author
Greg Bluett
1958-2012

We loved missionaries, kiaps and png people

1958-2026

Company history

John Broons wrote the story a family business consultant

A FAMILY BUSINESS HISTORY

The Bluett Family and Islands Petroleum

A family business history, from Bahá'í pioneers in the Highlands to a national fuel distributor

Prepared by John Broons for Paul Bluett and the Bluett family · Private - for the family only

About this history

Until now, the story of the Bluett family and its business has lived in Paul's published stories, in family memory, and in the heads of the people who built it. This document brings those strands together in one place for the first time.

It draws on three sources: Paul's 148 published stories, the conversations I have had with members of the family this year, and the public record. Where the sources disagree, I have taken the most likely account and noted the open questions separately so that Paul can settle them.

It is written to be corrected. Please mark anything that is wrong, missing or told in a way you would tell differently. The family's own version of its story matters more than mine.

The history covers four things my brief asked for:

- How the business was created and how it grew, and the family's part in it over time.
- The major family and business decisions, and what came of them.
- The values and purpose of the family and of the business, and how they have shaped decisions.
- The vision Paul started with, and how it has changed into what exists today.

Chapters 1 to 9 tell the story in order. Chapter 10 draws out the values that run through it, chapter 11 sets out the turning-point decisions and their lessons, and chapter 12 looks at the part of the story that has not been written yet. A timeline and a list of the people involved are at the back.

1. Pioneers (1951-1973)

The story of Islands Petroleum begins with a decision that had nothing to do with business. In 1963 Noel Bluett, a Canberra accountant with a thriving practice, travelled to Haifa to help elect the first Universal House of Justice of the Bahá'í

Faith. Within two years he had sold the practice and taken his wife Margaret and their children to the Highlands of New Guinea.

Noel and Margaret had met in Sydney in 1951. Both became Bahá'ís, and they married in September 1952. Their first two sons were born a year apart in the irrigation town of Leeton, where they had volunteered to "pioneer": Michael in May 1953 and Paul on 9 May 1954. In Canberra Noel built an accountancy practice and helped found the Civic Co-op Building Society, which later became the Advance Bank. He also served as treasurer of the Australian Bahá'í community.

When the Bahá'í world called for pioneers in 1964, the Bluetts answered. In October that year ten-year-old Paul sailed from Sydney to Bombay on the SS Himalaya, bound for the New Era Bahá'í school at Panchgani in India. As he later put it:

My home ran away from me when I was ten.

In February 1965 the family landed at Goroka airstrip. Noel had been appointed the first Executive Officer of the new PNG Coffee Marketing Board. It was a job that put him at the centre of an industry turning Highlands subsistence farmers into coffee growers. The family ignored the expatriate advice of the day and spent their first Easter in the village of the coffee pioneer Bono Azanifa. Margaret later wrote:

we didn't consume alcohol, didn't want to play golf and were anxious to meet local people.

Goroka also put the Bluett children to work. Between 1965 and 1971 Paul held seven part-time jobs: assembling pushbikes, selling Show programmes, three years at Steamships, and driving a PMV over the Daulo Pass at sixteen on an adjusted licence, with his father counting the takings.

Goroka didn't just raise children - it put them straight to work.

Noel's career in coffee ended abruptly. In the early 1970s he set up a coffee export company with the Leahy and Collins plantation families. In 1973, while he was in Israel as PNG's delegate to the Bahá'í elections, the company's futures positions went badly wrong. Noel covered for his manager and lost his job. Paul called it "the universe clearing its throat before introducing the next chapter."

2. Lae and the trading habit (1973-1979)

The family moved to Lae, and Noel became what Paul affectionately calls an "anything for a buck" trader. He bought the Lae Laundry from departing Australians, added second-hand clothing and dry cleaning, ran a video club, and traded shells, chillies, cardamom and trade goods. He also set up RAC Trading, a Chinatown store with a refrigeration partner. Independence in 1975 strengthened the kina and rewarded those who had got established beforehand.

In PNG there was a saying that if you got established before Independence, you were home and hosed.

On 9 May 1974 Noel and his Rabaul friend John Mills incorporated Anisa, a company exporting commercial seashells (trochus, used for mother-of-pearl buttons) with branches in Rabaul and Lae. Paul later called Anisa "the tree of life - growth, resilience and prosperity". It was the first piece of what became the family group.

Paul, meanwhile, was becoming an accountant. His mother told him to take PNG citizenship as Independence approached, and he did. In 1976 he married Ione, whose Bahá'í family had long been friends with the Bluetts, after both finished their degrees in Hobart. They had no money; Ione remembers shopping at the university markets, mostly for vegetables. Their first son, Oliver, was born in 1977. In December that year, with Oliver about six months old, Paul left Australia for a two-year contract with an accounting firm in Lae. Nathan followed on 2 February 1979, born while Paul sat his final chartered accountancy exams.

The opportunity that changed their lives was about to arrive by telephone.

3. Rabaul and Gazelle Agencies (1980-1984)

The business Paul bought had its own Bahá'í origins. In 1954 Rodney Hancock came to the Territory as a pioneer, aiming for the Admiralty Islands. He never reached Manus. Instead he started a customs agency and transport business in Rabaul with two trucks. In the early 1960s his employee Tony Saunders took it over and incorporated it as Gazelle Agencies. In the late 1960s or early 1970s it passed to John Mills. Each sale was a friendly handover on the same terms: no deposit, vendor finance, no interest, to someone the seller knew and trusted.

In late 1979 John Mills rang Noel on the office party line. Paul recalls the call:

Sometimes your life changes because of years of careful planning. Sometimes it changes because of one sentence over the phone.

Mills wanted to retire. He offered Gazelle Agencies and his half of Anisa as a package, on the familiar terms: no deposit, no interest, five years to pay. Noel chose Paul over his elder brother Michael, a lawyer.

Perhaps he thought an accountant would count the risks, whereas a lawyer might actually read them.

The deal was sealed over a weekend. Paul prepared the accounts the takeover was based on himself. On 4 January 1980 Paul, Ione and their two small boys arrived in Rabaul owning "one and a half companies, a mortgage and an overdraft". The business came with three houses, a car, an office in a rented tin shed in Market Street, and a fleet of trucks that were falling apart. Paul also became Government Auctioneer for the Islands Region. Ione ran the office administration while raising the children.

The bank wanted security for a $40,000 overdraft. Noel guaranteed $30,000 after some family haggling, and Paul had the guarantee lifted within the year as the account moved into credit. By the end of 1984, about six months early, John Mills had been paid in full.

The early years were about saying yes "to anything that might generate a kina": customs clearance, wharf cartage, packing personal effects, auctions. Ione recalls Paul raising prices gently, trading up to better second-hand trucks, and driving government auction trucks down from the Highlands himself. The staff who came with the business stayed for decades. They included Elena Yaganegi, part-time accountant in 1980 and soon full-time, and her husband Habib, the customs agent.

Rabaul itself was a gamble. In October 1983, as Paul was auctioning government vehicles, a tremor hit and a Stage 2 volcanic alert was declared.

Nobody wanted to invest in a town that might explode.

For the next eleven years the town lived in limbo, and so did investment in it.

4. Into fuel: Mobil and Bougainville (1983-1990)

Islands Petroleum grew out of a customer relationship. From 1983 Gazelle Agencies was clearing Mobil's lubricants through customs. In 1985 Mobil asked Paul to cart fuel on Bougainville. Paul did the sums and pushed back:

I can't make Bougainville cartage work on cartage alone. I really need to sell fuel too, otherwise I can't cover the cost of an expatriate manager.

Mobil's Bob Gleason agreed on the spot. Paul's brother Greg bought a truck at a Goroka auction and brought it down to Lae with a Honda on the back. Paul formed a new company, Kieta Transport, to operate Mobil's depot at Loloho, and appointed a Bahá'í from Malaysia, Baljit (renamed "Bill"), as its first manager.

1 truck. 1 Honda. 0 business plan software. 100% confidence.

It worked. Volume at Loloho roughly doubled within a year, and Paul gained a reputation inside Mobil as a business doubler. From 1985 he was also flying fuel into Buka. Mobil began offering more. In 1988 it gave Paul's group the sales desk at its Rabaul terminal, and a new company, Gazelle Transport, was formed to run it. Paul calls this "the real beginning". Kimbe followed in about 1989 and Kavieng in about 1990. A Mobil manager then asked the obvious question: was the company selling transport or selling fuel? Gazelle Transport became Islands Petroleum.

Two patterns took hold in these years. The first was people. Over the years Paul employed about twenty Malaysians in PNG, many of them Bahá'ís, and in his words they "formed part of the backbone of our company". Shahin joined in Rabaul in 1989 and over 37 years managed Rabaul, Arawa, Kavieng, Alotau, Madang and Port Moresby. He is now a director. Rajah built the Kimbe branch from a vacant block between Shell and BP, with a borrowed BP trailer.

Companies are not really built from tanks, trucks and ships... They are built by people who stay.

The second was diversification around the core. Noel's shipping venture with a German volunteer passed to Paul. The company bought the old Burns Philp wharf in Rabaul and at its peak ran five tugs and five barges, with a salvage sideline. Paul

kept each venture in its own company, a rule he still follows. Later he would describe selling fuel, compared with his father's many ventures, as "an extraordinarily focused business model".

Then came Bougainville's crisis. From 1989 married staff were evacuated, the company's Malaysian staff faced deportation threats, and the business on the island collapsed. The last transactions at Loloho were on 4 June 1990. Depot manager Jacob swapped the cash for cocoa cheques and got them out by sea mail on the Cosmaris. He escaped to Rabaul and became the company's chief mechanic.

Jacob became the Bank of Loloho.

In 1991 Paul went back with a government-escorted business party, by Iroquois helicopter and armoured Land Rover, to see his customers.

5. The mountain wakes (1994)

In the early hours of Sunday 18 September 1994 the earthquakes began. They continued for about 27 hours. Then Tavurvur and Vulcan erupted together, and Rabaul was buried. Paul moved a 16,000-litre tanker over Tunnel Hill to fuel the emergency vehicles, then led a convoy of forty or fifty people north to a logging camp at Put Put. He arrived with five unaccompanied children who had been thrown onto his truck by their mothers.

The Bluetts lost their two-storey home on Grove Street. In all, Paul lost "three houses, three flats and three shops. I nearly went broke."

The fuel depot survived. It stood near the wharf, in the corridor between the two volcanoes. Mobil chartered a flight out of Tokua for women and children. Paul stayed. He took ABC correspondent Sean Dorney through the checkpoints into the ruined town, and stood on the pumice-covered wharf.

I had no authority whatsoever to open harbours, but nobody else seemed to be doing it.

Ione remembers that the fuel trucks were back on the road within days, keeping the lights on through generators. The next day Paul drove to a new office in Kokopo, which became the company's base for the next three decades.

The eruption also brought an unexpected turn in the Mobil relationship. Mobil's head office took back control of the Rabaul facility and bought back the stock. The replacement manager then paid his own hotel bill by writing an order in the company's docket book. Before long the depot was handed back, and later Mobil sold it to the company outright.

History is full of great turning points. Ours just happened to come on our own letterhead.

In January 1995 Paul and his German partner Jurgen took one of the company's tugs across the harbour and climbed the still-erupting Tavurvur. Rabaul was finished as a town, but not as a home. The family moved to Nonga, then to "Camelot" on Kenabot

Hill above Kokopo. Oliver and Nathan were already at the Maxwell Bahá'í school on Vancouver Island and received the news by fax.

6. Building the network (1995-2005)

The years after the volcano were years of steady expansion from a new base. Paul's working style was frugal and incremental:

- He spent on tanks, trucks and construction, and on little else.
- He kept each venture in its own company.
- He rented rather than bought wherever he could: "it's the use, not the ownership that's important".

Oliver describes a business "run on a shoestring", where marginal depots cut grass around town to pay their way. He also describes Paul fighting Mobil for a proper distributor commission.

The company reached beyond the islands. By the late 1990s it had a first presence in Port Moresby. In the early 2000s, pushed hard by one of its Malaysian managers, it began supplying Highlands traders. Until then it had been "coastal only". In the 2007 Oro floods, the same improvising spirit kept fuel moving when Cyclone Guba took out the bridges. The town built an earthen wharf at Goma, and the company bought 400,000 litres off a passing barge.

No manual had prepared us for this.

The defining deal of the period came in 2003. ExxonMobil was leaving small, high-risk, low-return operations in small countries. It offered to sell the three terminals Islands Petroleum already ran, plus Alotau and Popondetta. Paul called his eldest son Oliver, then an accountant in Gladstone, and Oliver joined in August 2003 to help negotiate. Mobil's approvals took two years. The deal was done on vendor finance, and the company traded the depots for eighteen months while the titles transferred. It completed in 2005 with a combined volume of about 35 million litres. These were small, run-down depots that a global major no longer wanted to run; the family saw what they could become.

Nathan has called it the first acquisition and "the beginning of the modern era".

7. The modern company (2005-2019)

From 2005 the company grew at double-digit rates for more than twenty years in a row. In 2006 Nathan joined as IT manager. At the time the company had five locations, dial-up connections and stand-alone systems. In 2008 Mobil offered the lubricants distributorship on condition the company opened warehouses in Madang, Lae and Port Moresby. Paul again insisted on fuel as well, and the company had its first mainland depots.

Its model was that of a distributor that adds value. It owned few assets and gave customers credit, service and reliability. In Nathan's words: "we said yes to

everything... our trucks were there at 6am." Behind the scenes the company professionalised:

- A Pronto ERP project ran from 2009 and went live at the first site in 2014, replacing the in-house accounting system.
- Paul's view of it changed after a failed 2010 merger with a similar-sized independent.
- External HR managers came in from 2014.

The company also began building its own infrastructure:

- About 2016: a terminal on a back-filled swamp in Lae, alongside the Mobil and Shell depots, holding about 20 million litres. Lae is now the company's biggest market.
- About 2020-21: two hectares opposite the new main wharf in Port Moresby, the Sasiva site at Motukea, bought from Peter Maxtone-Graham.

These years also brought change in the family. Paul and Ione's marriage ended. In 2013 Paul married Kavitha, a Malaysian Bahá'í whose brother Thiagan had come to PNG in 1989 as a volunteer and become one of the company's managers. Kavitha herself had worked in the company's depots in Rabaul, Kavieng and Alotau. From 2014 she was Paul's PA and then ran marketing.

I thought I had employed my wife, but it soon became clear that she was managing me.

8. Giving back

Generosity runs through the company's story. It began with Bahá'í hospitality on Rabaul verandahs and grew into a corporate commitment. Paul hosted seventy Canadian sailors for dinner when their tall ship refuelled at the Rabaul wharf, and 140 villagers for State of Origin in his lounge at Nonga. Other examples:

- 2006: the company gave K5,000 to build a library in the Nakanai area with its customer Hargy Oil Palms.
- Since about 2016: a drum of fuel every month to Donna's Haus Pikinini orphanage in Wau.
- A table at the Don Bosco opera fundraiser for rural maternity facilities.

In 2017 Paul and Kavitha started the Colour Run under the We Are One Foundation.

Then, in 2017, we started the Colour Run, and our charity work truly began.

By its tenth year the Islands Petroleum Colour Run drew about 10,000 people in Port Moresby. It had spread to Kavieng, Kimbe and, in 2026, Popondetta, where company staff delivered the drums and colour powder themselves. The Foundation now has its own small board and office at Rangeview, near the Bahá'í House of Worship.

Ten thousand people laughing, walking, dancing and proving that sometimes the healthiest thing you can do isn't chase a personal best - it's simply turn up.

9. The next chapter (2019-2026)

In late 2019 Paul, then 65, began to formalise the leadership. Nathan was named chief executive, Oliver chief financial officer and Craig chief operating officer. The company took on its first external adviser and began building a board, which now has an independent chair. Paul's stated strategy is to replace employee directors over time with independent ones "so that there's a proper board fiduciary accountability".

The numbers tell the story of the modern era:

- From about 35 million litres in 2005 to about 460 million litres today.
- About 700 staff, some of them with more than thirty years' service.
- One year of 40% growth when a competitor left the market.

In 2025-26 the head office began moving from Kokopo to Port Moresby, deliberately, one person at a time. Paul joked that he was "moving head office to Moresby after only 46 years - not rushing these decisions." In 2026 the company commissioned its own low-sulphur diesel tank in Lae.

We'd started with shells, borrowed money and a generous seller - and built something very special.

10. What the family has stood for

The Bahá'í Faith is the thread that runs through this whole story. It took Noel and Margaret to the Highlands, it brought Rodney Hancock to Rabaul, it shaped who the company hired, and it sits behind much of how the family gives back. Several Bahá'í principles show up again and again in how the family and the business have actually behaved.

The oneness of humanity

The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens. - Bahá'u'lláh

The Bluetts arrived in Goroka and spent their first Easter in a Highlands village rather than at the golf club. Paul took PNG citizenship. The company was built by Papua New Guineans, Malaysians, Australians and others working side by side, and many of them stayed for thirty years or more.

Work done in a spirit of service

In Bahá'í teaching, work done in a spirit of service is a form of worship. The family took that literally. Paul held seven jobs before he left school, the company said yes to any honest work that might earn a kina, and the Colour Run and the We Are One Foundation turned the company's success outward into the community.

Trustworthiness

Every handover in the business's early history was made on trust: no deposit, no interest, vendor finance, to someone the seller knew. Paul paid John Mills out six

months early. Jacob carried the Loloho takings out as cocoa cheques. A business built on that kind of trust has to keep earning it.

Education

Paul was sent to a Bahá'í school in India at ten. Oliver and Nathan went to the Maxwell Bahá'í school in Canada. Paul's hope is that every one of his children earns a degree, and the company has invested steadily in professional systems and outside expertise as it grew.

The equality of women and men

Margaret was a pioneer in her own right. Ione ran the office in the Rabaul years while raising the family. Kavitha ran marketing and now leads the Foundation's work.

Consultation

The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. - 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Bahá'í consultation asks people to speak frankly, listen fully, and then stand behind the group's decision. As the company moves from a founder-led business to one run by a board and a leadership team, this may be the principle that matters most for the next chapter.

How the business has worked

Alongside the faith, a set of business habits has held from the first truck to the four-hundred-millionth litre:

- Grow through relationships. Almost every step forward, from Bougainville to the 2005 Mobil purchase, came from a partner who trusted the family to deliver.
- Hold firm on what makes it work. Paul would cart fuel for Mobil only if he could sell it too, in 1985 and again in 2008.
- Grow step by step, within your means. Spend on tanks, trucks and people who deliver; be careful with everything else.
- Keep each venture in its own company. One venture's trouble never sinks the others.
- Value the use, not the ownership. Rent where you can, buy where it is strategic, as with the Lae swamp and the Port Moresby wharf block.
- Keep the people who stay. "Companies are not really built from tanks, trucks and ships... They are built by people who stay."
- Say yes, and turn up. The trucks were there at 6am.

11. Turning points and their lessons

Year | The decision | What came of it | The lesson

1964-65 | Noel and Margaret leave a thriving Canberra life to pioneer in PNG | The family puts down roots in PNG; the children grow up working | Purpose can matter more than security

1979-80 | Noel chooses Paul to take over Gazelle Agencies and Anisa | Paul and Ione move to Rabaul with one and a half companies and an overdraft | How a business is handed on shapes everything after it

1985 | Paul tells Mobil he will cart fuel only if he can sell it too | Islands Petroleum's fuel business is born | Know what makes the numbers work, and hold to it

1985-90 | Recruit Bahá'í managers from Malaysia for the regional depots | A loyal core of managers who stay for decades | The right people matter more than the right assets

1990 | Bougainville is lost to the crisis | Staff get out safely; Jacob becomes "the Bank of Loloho" | Look after people first; the business can be rebuilt

1994 | Paul stays in Rabaul after the eruption to keep fuel moving | The depot survives, the company relocates to Kokopo, and Mobil later sells the depot to the family | In a crisis, the one who keeps turning up earns the trust

2003-05 | Buy five depots from ExxonMobil on vendor finance; bring Oliver home to help | The start of the modern company | The next generation can be the difference on the big deal

2008 | Take the lubricants distributorship on condition of fuel on the mainland | The first mainland depots; Lae becomes the biggest market | Every opportunity is a chance to negotiate the next one

2009-14 | Invest in a proper ERP system and outside HR | A company that can run at scale | Growth eventually needs systems, not just the founder

2017 | Start the Colour Run | Ten thousand people a year; the Foundation | Giving back can become part of the company's identity

2019 | Name Nathan CEO, Oliver CFO and Craig COO; begin building a board | The founder-led company starts to become a governed one | Formal roles are the start of succession, not the end of it

2025-26 | Move head office to Port Moresby, one person at a time | Islands Petroleum is no longer just of the islands | Big changes can be made gently

12. The chapter still to be written

Every family business reaches the point where the founder's vision has to become something the whole family can carry. In 1980 the vision was simple: make a living, serve the community, and say yes to anything that might earn a kina. In 2026 the company is a national distributor with about 700 staff, a board with an independent chair, and a head office in the capital.

The next part of the story will be written by the family together. It turns on a few questions that no document can answer for them:

- Which of the family's values should guide the business for the next twenty years, and how will they be kept alive?
- How will the family, the board and the leadership team make decisions together, and work through disagreement?
- What role will each member of the next generation play: in the business, in its ownership, in the Foundation, or alongside it?
- What does a fair outcome look like, for those who work in the business and those who do not?

These are the conversations I hope to have with each of you, one at a time and then together.

Appendix A - Timeline

When | What happened

1951-52 | Noel Bluett and Margaret Mason meet, become Bahá'ís, marry in Sydney (27 Sep 1952)

1953-54 | Michael born 8 May 1953; Paul born 9 May 1954, Leeton NSW

1954 | Rodney Hancock arrives in PNG as a Bahá'í pioneer, starts a customs and transport agency in Rabaul with two trucks

1958 | Noel Treasurer of the Australian Bahá'í National Assembly; accountancy practice and Civic Co-op Building Society in Canberra

early 1960s | Tony Saunders, Hancock's employee, incorporates the agency as Gazelle Agencies

1963 | Noel in Haifa for the first election of the Universal House of Justice; family decides to pioneer

Oct 1964 | Paul (10) sails on the SS Himalaya to the New Era Bahá'í school, Panchgani, India

Feb 1965 | Noel and Margaret arrive in Goroka; Noel first Executive Officer of the PNG Coffee Marketing Board

1965-71 | Paul's teenage jobs in Goroka (Steamies, PMV driving over the Daulo Pass)

c.1971 | Noel becomes manager of New Guinea Coffee Brokers

late 1960s / early 1970s | John Mills buys Gazelle Agencies from Tony Saunders on vendor terms

1973 | Coffee-futures losses at the export company while Noel is in Israel; Noel loses his job; family moves to Lae (laundry, shells, trade goods)

9 May 1974 | Noel and John Mills form Anisa (commercial shell export), Rabaul and Lae

Sep 1975 | PNG Independence; Paul applies for citizenship (granted c.1978 per Paul)

1976 (or early 1977) | Paul and Ione marry after finishing degrees in Hobart; Paul had worked at Coopers in Hobart

1977 | Oliver born; Paul takes a two-year accounting contract in Lae (Dec 1977, Oliver about six months old)

2 Feb 1979 | Nathan born in Lae

late 1979 | John Mills offers Gazelle Agencies and his half of Anisa; Noel picks Paul

4 Jan 1980 | Paul and Ione move to Rabaul; takeover effective 1 Jan 1980, no deposit, no interest; Paul also Government Auctioneer for the Islands Region

1983 | Customs clearance work for Mobil lubricants begins

Oct 1983 | Stage 2 volcano alert in Rabaul; investment frozen for eleven years

end 1984 | Vendor finance to John Mills paid off (c.4.5 years)

11 Nov 1984 | Jason born at Vunapope

1985 | Mobil asks for Bougainville fuel cartage; Paul insists on selling fuel too; new company (Kieta Transport), Malaysian manager Baljit ("Bill"); fuel sales into Buka begin

c.1985-87 | Bougainville volume roughly doubles; Paul's name at Mobil as a "business doubler"

25 May 1987 | Julian born at Vunapope

1988 | Mobil offers the Rabaul terminal sales desk; Gazelle Transport formed - "the real beginning"

1989 | Shahin joins in Rabaul; Thiagan arrives as a Bahá'í volunteer; Kimbe depot (c.1989); Bougainville crisis begins

c.1990 | Kavieng depot; Gazelle Transport renamed Islands Petroleum at Mobil's suggestion

4 Jun 1990 | Last transactions at the Loloho depot; Jacob ships the cash out as cocoa cheques

1991 | Paul returns to Bougainville with government-escorted business party

1 Apr 1993 | Eliot born at Vunapope

18-19 Sep 1994 | Rabaul eruption: Bluett home and nine properties lost; Mobil depot by the wharf survives; trucks delivering within days; office moves to Kokopo

1994-95 | Mobil head office takes back the Rabaul depot, then hands it back and later sells it to the company

Jan 1995 | Paul and German partner Jurgen climb the still-erupting Tavurvur by company tug

late 1990s | First presence in Port Moresby

early 2000s | Highlands distributors set up, driven by a Malaysian manager

2003 | ExxonMobil offers to sell five terminals ("3 plus 2", incl. Alotau and Popondetta); Oliver joins (Aug 2003) to help negotiate

2005 | Purchase completes after two years of Mobil approvals; combined volume c.35m litres

2006 | K5,000 library at Nakanai with Hargy Oil Palms; Nathan joins as IT manager (Sep)

2007 | Cyclone Guba: earthen wharf at Goma, 400,000 L bought off a passing barge

2008 | Mobil lubricants distributorship; fuel restarted in Madang, Lae and Port Moresby - first mainland depots

2009-14 | Pronto ERP project replaces the in-house system; first site live 2014

2010 | Attempted merger with a similar-sized independent

2013 | Paul marries Kavitha (Cairns)

2014 | Kavitha joins as Paul's PA, then marketing; Kokopo house

c.2016 | Lae terminal built on reclaimed swamp, c.20m litres

2017 | First Colour Run (We Are One Foundation)

late 2019 | Nathan named CEO, Oliver CFO, Craig COO; first external adviser (Tom Cordukes)

c.2020-21 | Two hectares opposite the Port Moresby main wharf (Sasiva/Motukea)

c.2024 | 40% growth year after a competitor's exit

2025-26 | Head office moves to Port Moresby, one person at a time

2026 | Lae low-sulphur ("Hi-Speed") diesel tank; c.460m litres, c.700 staff; independent directors joining the board; 10th Colour Run

Appendix B - People

Name | Who | Era

Noel Bluett (1930-2014) | Paul's father; accountant, Bahá'í pioneer, first Executive Officer of the PNG Coffee Marketing Board, co-founder of Anisa | 1951-2014

Margaret Bluett (1933-2026) | Paul's mother; nurse, Bahá'í pioneer, author ("Margaret Tebele"), died 21 June 2026 aged 93 | 1951-2026

Michael Bluett (1953-1983) | Paul's elder brother; Lae lawyer | to 1983

Greg Bluett (1958-2012) | Paul's brother; TV cameraman; bought the first Bougainville truck | 1980s

Paul Bluett (b. 1954) | Founder; chartered accountant; general manager, later director | 1980-

Ione Bluett (née Salter) | Paul's first wife; ran the office administration in the Rabaul years | 1976-c.2012

Oliver Bluett (b. 1977) | Eldest son; joined Aug 2003 for the Mobil purchase; depot and operations manager; CFO | 2003-

Nathan Bluett (b. 1979) | Second son; IT manager 2006; CEO from late 2019 | 2006-

Jason, Julian, Eliot | Paul's younger sons (b. 1984, 1987, 1993) | -

Kavitha (Kavi) Bluett | Paul's second wife (m. 2013); PA, marketing; co-founder of the Colour Run; runs the Foundation's projects | 2014-

Rodney Hancock | Bahá'í pioneer; founded the Rabaul customs and transport agency (1954) | 1954-1960s

Tony Saunders | Hancock's employee; incorporated Gazelle Agencies | 1960s

John Mills | Owner of Gazelle Agencies; co-founder of Anisa; sold to Paul 1980 | 1970s-1980

Elena ("Aunty Helen") and Habib Yaganegi | Accountant (1980 on) and customs agent | 1980-

Bob Gleason | Mobil, Lae; agreed the Bougainville fuel concession | 1985

Baljit ("Bill") | First Malaysian manager, Kieta/Loloho | 1985-c.1989

Jacob | Loloho depot manager; later chief mechanic | to 1990

Shahin | Joined Rabaul 1989; manager across six branches; director | 1989-

Rajah | Built and ran the Kimbe branch for 30 years | c.1989-

Thiagan | Kavitha's brother; Bahá'í volunteer 1989; long-serving manager | 1989-

Jurgen | German business partner (shipping, 1990s) | 1990s

Craig | COO from late 2019 | 2019-

Tom Cordukes | First external adviser (2019); later a mentor | 2019-

1960

Mike Bromley to dinner

Collins and Leahy history



Mike Bromley

The Joker and the Businessman

I went to the yacht club on Friday night with my friend Richard Macarthur. The joker draw was worth “only” K80,000, so there wasn’t much of a crowd. Apparently, eighty grand barely warrants leaving the house these days.

Richard lives aboard a yacht at the club, which conveniently eliminates the problem of finding a taxi home. I also met his Chinese girlfriend, Annie Wang.

Then a substantial piece of Papua New Guinea’s business history came over and sat beside me.

Mike Bromley.

With him were his new Filipino wife and his daughter Veronica, who is fifteen. We settled in for the draw. Richard had given me some tickets, although, as I wasn’t a member, he would have had to claim the prize if mine came up. I assumed we would share the spoils. We hadn’t negotiated the percentages, which, considering the company I was keeping, was probably a serious commercial oversight.

We didn’t win. That simplified the negotiations considerably.

Afterwards, we moved to Aromas Indian restaurant at the adjoining waterfront property, where I began asking Mike about his business life. An evening that started with a raffle became an informal lesson in the commercial history of PNG.

But first, we established our sporting credentials.

Years ago, I competed against Mike in a Gumi race. I won the junior section; he won the seniors. Mike told me he had entered thirteen times. He lost the first race, then won the next twelve in consecutive years.

He seemed particularly pleased with that record. The man has accumulated substantial business interests, but twelve victories floating down a river clearly still count for something.

I asked how Collins & Leahy began.

As Mike remembered it, Eddie Collins and Danny Leahy bought 67 trade stores from a Chinese gentleman who was retiring. He couldn't recall the man's name. The historical accounts I've found describe a purchase from trader Mick Reilly, so there is a detail still to untangle there. This was dinner-table history, told by someone who had lived through much of what followed.

Mike finished school in 1966 and went straight to work for Collins & Leahy in Goroka, about six years after the partnership began.

Those were the formative years of Highlands commerce: trade stores, coffee, trucks and entrepreneurs building businesses in a country undergoing extraordinary change. Mike was getting his education across the counter.

After several years, he moved to Mount Hagen and established three stores of his own. Manton also had three, and eventually they merged their businesses.

According to Mike, the division of labour gradually became straightforward: Mike did most of the work, while Manton came into the office for morning and afternoon tea.

I suspect Manton might have supplied a different account, but he wasn't at dinner.

Meanwhile, Eddie Collins and Danny Leahy were getting older. A consultant advised them that the company needed a CEO. They went headhunting and approached Mike.

In the resulting arrangement, Collins & Leahy acquired the Bromley and Manton stores, and Mike became CEO of the business he had joined straight from school.

It was quite a progression: school-leaver, employee, independent storekeeper, then back through the front door to run the company.

Eventually, however, Mike and Danny Leahy began having differences of opinion. Discussions turned to one buying the other out.

This part of the evening became complicated. Steamships and Swire entered the story, shareholdings came into play, and a proposed purchase of Mike’s interest would, as he explained it, have left Danny as a minority shareholder.

Then came the twist.

Danny had put a figure on buying Mike out. Mike used that same figure to buy Danny out instead.

One imagines there was rather less enthusiasm for morning tea during those negotiations.

Mike described it as tense. With control of a major Highlands business at stake, I could well believe him. These were decisions that helped shape PNG’s commercial landscape, being recalled over an Indian meal beside the harbour.

The eventual ownership arrangements would take more than a dinner napkin to explain. But Mike told me he now owns 22 per cent of Steamships, a significant enterprise in PNG, along with interests in Russia, Brisbane and other successful businesses, including the helicopter company Hevi Lift.

I didn’t manage to get the full inventory. We would probably have needed breakfast.

He told me he was 78.

From joining Collins & Leahy after school in 1966 to building and acquiring businesses across decades, he has had an extraordinary run. And there he was, still going, enjoying dinner with his family and telling the story with evident satisfaction.

I went to the yacht club hoping to win K80,000.

Instead, I got an evening with a man who had helped make PNG business history—and who remained particularly proud of winning twelve Gumi races.

1962

The rise and fall of mathematics

Maths art and language

My Rise and Fall in Mathematics

Mrs Hunt handed back my Grade Two maths test.

197 out of 200.

I looked at the result and had a revelation: I was first in the class.

This was valuable information for a small boy developing an opinion of himself. Apparently, I was rather good at this school business.

There were four classes—A, B, C and D—and I was in A. In those days, the letters meant exactly what we all suspected they meant. Nobody had thought to disguise the academic pecking order with names of native birds.

Mrs Hunt was older and particularly good at teaching me maths. Through Grades Two, Three and Four, I became accustomed to being top in that subject.

Deborah Ensel, my heartthrob, came first in practically everything else.

An excellent arrangement. She had beauty and brains, and I had arithmetic. Between us, we had the curriculum covered, although I'm not sure Deborah knew we were a partnership.

Then came India.

At the Bahá'í World Congress in London in 1963, Sheriar persuaded my mother that sending her sons to the Bahá'í school in Panchgani was a splendid idea.

It must have been a convincing presentation. He acquired two pupils and responsibility for us during the school holidays.

At New Era, I was moved up to Class Five, and Sheriar became both my maths teacher and guardian. He helped my maths progress considerably.

I also rose to the top in English, although, as it was my first language, I probably shouldn't have accepted quite so much personal credit.

Hindi was a different matter.

So was Farsi, which I had chosen instead of Marathi. Apparently, I felt that learning one unfamiliar language wasn't enough of a challenge.

Then there was art.

Bottom of the class.

My mathematical gifts did not extend to drawing anything anyone could recognise. Give me a sum and I could produce an answer. Give me a pencil and ask for a cow, and the examiner had a much harder job.

My art teacher Mrs Deshpande complained to my mother that Michael and i were the worst artists she had ever seen !

She had suffered smallpox when she was young, and her face bore the scars. Seeing them helped me understand why I had been given my smallpox vaccination.

The vaccination put me in bed for a few days and left a little scar I still carry. Even as a child, I could appreciate that I had got the better end of that arrangement.

Eventually, I joined my family in Papua New Guinea and attended Goroka Primary School.

Back on familiar mathematical ground, I resumed my position at the top.

Mr Edwards taught a composite Grade Five and Six class. When the Grade Six pupils across the room couldn’t answer a maths question, a helpful hand would rise from Grade Five.

Mine.

I’m sure the older children were delighted.

Sheriar’s teaching had prepared me well. I was a year younger, sitting across the room, and apparently available for emergency mathematical assistance.

In Grade Six, Mr O’Leary took over and gave me another boost.

At the end of the day, we did mental arithmetic. I was quick—sometimes quicker than I was accurate—but I generally came first. There was always the occasional wrong answer to remind everyone I remained human.

Mr O’Leary also let me work ahead through the maths textbook, keeping track of my progress while the rest of the class continued at a more sensible pace.

Within a few months, I had reached the end.

“What’s next?”

A dangerous question for a teacher who still had most of the school year to fill.

By then, my mathematical confidence was in excellent health.

Then I went to Trinity Grammar in Sydney.

Trinity didn’t use the familiar A, B, C and D system. It used other letters, presumably to preserve a little mystery, but every boy knew which class was the top one.

L.

I was in L.

Naturally.

Then the maths results came back.

Twentieth.

There must, surely, have been an administrative error.

There wasn’t.

Sydney, it turned out, contained a considerable number of very bright boys, and an alarming proportion of them were sitting in my classroom.

My reign had ended without so much as a farewell assembly.

I now had to work to keep up. Being good at maths in one school did not automatically make you king of the next. This was an educational experience in several senses.

Still, I persevered and took honours maths in my final two years. I finished in the top 40 per cent of the state’s honours stream—a respectable result, although possibly my lowest mark across all my subjects.

I got through and earned my scholarship. The little boy who had once stared proudly at 197 out of 200 had survived a few adjustments to his self-assessment.

At university, I took what I think was called quantitative methods. Much of it covered mathematical ground we had already encountered at school, so I managed reasonably well.

No coronation. No catastrophe. Just moderately competent progress.

Then I became an accountant and discovered that the work required rather more than winning the mental arithmetic competition.

Eventually, I had accountants of my own.

These days, they prepare the cash-flow projections and handle the mathematical tasks.

I look at the figures and ask questions.

Having once finished the entire maths textbook ahead of schedule, I now find myself waiting for someone else to finish the cash flow.

Mr O’Leary would probably have given them more work.

1963-2023

Geoff Heard -Radio in pidgin

Geoff Heard and the Young Michael Somare

Geoff Heard — The Early Days of PNG Radio

My old friend Geoff Heard came to Papua New Guinea in the early 1960s with Leila, initially working for AAP / Reuters.

Like so many people of that era, PNG got into his blood and he stayed.

Geoff moved into broadcasting and worked at various radio stations around the country, including Rabaul, Goroka and Bougainville, where he was later station manager.

Geoff once told me that in those early broadcasting days he worked alongside a young Michael Somare.

Both of them were involved in simultaneous translation, taking English into Tok Pisin and Tok Pisin back into English as the words were being spoken.

It is an extraordinary little piece of PNG history when you think about it.

Geoff remained a journalist, broadcaster and storyteller, while the young radio man working alongside him went on to become Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare, the first Prime Minister of an independent Papua New Guinea.

Geoff’s connection with PNG went much deeper than a job.

He made lifelong friendships, knew the country intimately and became part of its story.

He and Leila also adopted a Tolai boy, Aminio Bale, who retained his own name.

The sequel tomorrow

Geoff back right

Leila middle lady

1963-1966

Unrequited Love

4 love's one girlfriend

Unrequited Love

As I prepare to drive down memory lane from Hagen to Goroka today—in a car guarded by a dog—my mind has wandered back to my first love.

Or, more accurately, my first in a surprisingly long series of unrequited loves.

My love life began in 1963, just as the sexual revolution was gathering momentum. I was in Grade 3 at Lyneham Primary School in Canberra, although our particular revolution remained quite modest.

Deborah, the top girl in the class and the object of my affection, allowed me to kiss her. Unfortunately, she was accompanied by Anna and Joanne, who immediately lined up for equal treatment.

So, to kiss the girl I loved, I first had to kiss two girls I didn’t.

At eight years old, I had already discovered the high cost of romance.

Grades 4 and 5 took me to India, where my heart belonged to Natika. Nothing doing. She remained unmoved by my charms, assuming I had developed any by then.

By the time I reached Grade 5 in Goroka, I had transferred my affections to Melanie Lord. This time I decided on a grand romantic gesture and bought her a ring for two shillings and sixpence, complete with the letter M.

Soon afterwards, her mother accosted my mother in the aisle of Steamships and demanded to know the meaning of it all. Melanie and I hid behind our respective mothers’ skirts while the adults conducted the inquiry.

At least Melanie kept the ring.

Years later, she admitted—borrowing from Cat Stevens—that the first cut was the deepest. It was a touching confession, although, to be fair, at the time the cutting had been almost entirely on my side.

Our headmaster was Mr Edwards. We were in a composite class, and his son Johnny was in Grade 6. Melanie occasionally came to our house for Bible discussions but remained aloof. Apparently, discussing eternal love was acceptable; practising it with me was not.

Sadly, she moved away, and I moved up to Grade 6 with Mr O’Leary. I was the teacher’s pet because I was quick at maths—an ability that would later prove far more commercially useful than my skills with women.

My Grade 6 heartthrob was Shirley Ann Bowman. After a short but determined pursuit, she finally entertained my advances. Her good friend Kim Adaminaby tagged along, so once again romance became a group activity.

I was assigned the delicate diplomatic task of informing Mark Dwyer, newly admitted to this group, that Kim was interested in him.

He consented.

The four of us then met secretly for picnics in a coffee plantation. It all sounds wonderfully scandalous, but our behaviour was completely honourable. I don’t think I even got a kiss.

So there we were: two couples hiding among the coffee trees, fuelled by sandwiches, secrecy and absolutely no sexual revolution whatsoever.

1963-2023

Geoff Heard

A prequel to the sequel

Geoff Heard — The Prequel to the Sequel

Before Aminio, before Leila, before Shahab and Rhohan, there was Geoff Heard.

I liked Geoff.

He was intelligent, funny, and dangerously quick to challenge my view of the world. He once gave me Guns, Germs and Steel. I suspect it was his subtle way of calling me a smart-arse while cleverly leaving my ego intact enough to believe he was complimenting me.

Geoff married in Rabaul in 1964, to a young woman — or at least he thought she was young. Apparently she had been a little creative with her date of birth.

I can hardly criticise. I once adjusted mine too, although in my case it was to get a driver’s licence. Same crime, different ambition.

Sadly, Geoff and his wife had no children, so they adopted a young Tolai boy, Aminio Bale.

And that is where the sequel begins.

But Geoff’s own story was quite something.

Geoff and Michael Somare were probably two of the finest Tok Pisin speakers in PNG at the time. For a white man, Geoff’s command of the language was extraordinary. He didn’t just speak Tok Pisin; he understood its rhythm, humour and the way Papua New Guineans actually used it.

He translated volumes of Bahá’í material into Tok Pisin, and those translations stand to this day.

In my book, no less.

Eventually Geoff discovered that his wife’s arithmetic concerning her age had been a little too imaginative, and the marriage ended.

Years later I caught up with him in Melbourne. By then he was married to an ambitious Timorese woman, and Geoff somehow roped me into the extraordinary Fred “Hargy” Hargesheimer story — the American airman whose aircraft fell from the sky over New Britain during the war and who later devoted so much of his life to helping the people who had helped him.

Geoff ghost-wrote Hargy’s story, and eventually I found myself involved too.

Then came one of the great honours of my PNG life.

Geoff asked me to translate Hargy's final talk before his last walk back to the site of his crashed aircraft.

This was Geoff Heard asking me to translate Tok Pisin.

Geoff!

Arguably the best white Tok Pisin speaker PNG had ever produced.

No pressure.

I translated Hargy's words, but by then my Tok Pisin had acquired some newer PNG slang. So every now and then the crowd burst out laughing.

Poor Hargy would look puzzled.

He hadn't made a joke.

His translator had.

To Geoff's credit, instead of correcting me, he acknowledged that the language had moved on and that some of my newer expressions connected with the crowd.

I'll take that compliment to the grave.

Geoff eventually left his Timorese wife and her daughter and returned to Rabaul, where his heart had always been.

That I understand completely.

Rabaul has a habit of doing that to people. You can leave Rabaul, but apparently nobody has yet explained to Rabaul that it is supposed to leave you.

Back home, Geoff rescued a Tolai woman from what amounted to a life of servitude, living and working unpaid with a Tolai family. He married her, and they made their home at Butuwin.

I would sometimes see Geoff walking from Kokopo towards Butuwin, heading for his humble home in his straw hat.

I used to feel a little sorry for him.

Perhaps I shouldn't have.

He was back where he wanted to be, speaking the language he loved, among the people he understood, walking home to the woman he had chosen.

And so I can say they lived happily ever after.

Sadly, in Geoff's case, ever after wasn't very long. He passed away not too many years later.

So Geoff Heard is gone, Michael Somare is gone, and the title is vacant.

The search is now officially on for the best white Tok Pisin speaker in Papua New Guinea.

Applications may be submitted in Tok Pisin.

English translations will be viewed with suspicion.

And that brings us back to Aminio Bale…

Geoff light brown hair middle back

1963

My first story

London and Israel held my destiny

When I was eight, my parents went off to two great religious conferences — one in England and one in Israel — conferences which, with hindsight, quietly rearranged the entire future of our family while I was mainly concerned about jelly and ice cream.

My brother and I were usually treated as a “two birthdays for the price of one” arrangement. Same date, same cake, same candles, same confusion. Efficient parenting really.

But this year I was parked at my grandmother’s place in Earlwood — “Nanna” to me — and because it included my 9th birthday, she decided this was serious business.

I was granted:

* a day off school,
* a train trip into the city,
* shopping,
* and lunch at a Coles cafeteria.

To a child in the 1960s, this was basically Dubai.

The cafeteria was magnificent. Stainless steel rails. Trays that rattled. Women in hairnets. Steam rising from mystery vegetables. Pensioners guarding tables like chess grandmasters.

Then I saw it.

The dessert section.

There stood a parfait glass the size of Sydney Town Hall filled with ice cream, jelly, cream, nuts, wafers and possibly the hopes and dreams of mankind.

My eyes wrote a cheque my stomach could not cash.

I ordered it.

About three spoonfuls in, I realised I was defeated. The parfait stared back at me like Everest. I surrendered.

Nanna was horrified.

“Two bob wasted!” she said, delivering a small but memorable lecture on post-war economics, famine, and apparently my reckless financial management.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, my parents were calmly making decisions at conferences that would completely redirect the course of our lives.

The next year my brother had his birthday in an Indian school with probably no fuss whatsoever — no parfaits, no chrome cafeteria chairs, no wafers sticking out of ice cream like radio antennas.

By the time I turned ten, I announced I wanted to join him in India.

What was I thinking?

Apparently the spirit of adventure had overtaken the spirit of common sense.

A passport was arranged, and then came the greatest shock of my childhood.

My birthday… was not the same as my brother's.

My mother had adjusted the dates for convenience all those years. A harmless little administrative manoeuvre in her mind.

To me it was identity fraud on an international scale.

I remember thinking:
"If my birthday isn't my birthday… what else is a lie?"

Am I even eight?
Is Nanna really my grandmother?
Was the parfait ever financially recoverable?

And while I was trying to process this scandal, our family was already in motion.

While we were in India, my parents and three siblings moved to Papua New Guinea, all tracing back to those conferences in England and Haifa.

So somewhere in the great chain of destiny linking London, Haifa, India and New Guinea… sits a half-eaten Coles cafeteria parfait and a grandmother mourning the loss of two shillings.

1963

Tony Saunders

Wedding catch up



THE LONG PACIFIC THREAD

From Guadalcanal to Rabaul — and a wedding photograph generations later

Some stories begin with a plan.

Others begin with a war, cross an ocean, pass through several families and businesses, survive volcanoes and political upheaval, and then, seventy years later, unexpectedly turn up smiling in a photograph at a wedding.

This is one of those stories.

It begins with Alvin Blum.

Alvin was an American who had already seen rather more of the Pacific than most men would wish to see. During the Second World War he served in the region, including the Solomon Islands.

He first encountered the Solomons when Guadalcanal was a name associated with mud, malaria, battlefields and young men wondering whether they would ever get home.

Yet the Pacific has a peculiar habit of calling people back.

After the war Alvin married Gertrude, and in 1954 they returned to the Solomon Islands under very different circumstances. This time there were no armies to follow and no military supply lines. They came to build a life.

And build one they did.

Alvin seems to have possessed that wonderful affliction common to entrepreneurs: the conviction that virtually anything might make a business if only somebody would have a go.

He managed a hotel. There were shops, taxis, a bakery, dry-cleaning, ice blocks, soft drinks, a peanut-oil venture, fish and chips and eventually accommodation.

If Honiara needed something, Alvin apparently regarded this as a personal invitation to start producing it.

Some ventures worked.

Presumably some did not.

That has never stopped a proper entrepreneur.

Alongside all this were Alvin and Gertrude's Bahá'í activities and community service. They became deeply woven into the developing life of Honiara and the Solomon Islands.

Their daughter was Keithie Blum.

And this is where our Pacific threads begin quietly winding themselves together.

Keithie married Bruce Saunders.

At the time there was absolutely no reason to imagine that this marriage would one day have any connection with a fuel company in Papua New Guinea, a customs agency in Rabaul, or a photograph taken at a Saunders family wedding more than half a century later.

But somewhere along the way Bruce made what must have seemed an entirely ordinary suggestion.

His brother Tony Saunders should go and work for a businessman in Rabaul named Rodney Hancock.

And there our story jumps north-west across the Pacific.

Rodney had arrived in Rabaul in the 1950s and established R.K. Hancock Agencies. In time the business became Gazelle Agencies.

Rabaul in those days was an extraordinary little commercial universe.

Copra boats came in from the islands. Cargo was discharged onto the wharves. Chinese traders, Tolai entrepreneurs, Australian planters, shipping agents, customs

clerks and assorted Pacific adventurers all moved around one of the finest natural harbours in the world.

Business was personal.

You didn’t send somebody a LinkedIn request.

You knew somebody who knew somebody.

A bloke in the Solomon Islands told his brother about a bloke in Rabaul.

And sometimes history turned on exactly that.

Bruce Saunders suggesting Tony to Rodney Hancock became one small strand in the web surrounding the business Rodney was building.

Years passed.

Then, in 1980, another young man entered the story.

Me.

I was a chartered accountant who had developed the dangerous idea that perhaps accounting for other people’s businesses was not nearly as interesting as owning one myself.

I bought Gazelle Agencies.

Vendor finance helped, which was fortunate because I certainly didn’t have mountains of money lying around. In truth, the business was operating on something closer to enthusiasm than capital.

That little Rabaul operation eventually became Islands Petroleum.

None of us could possibly have imagined what would follow.

Bougainville.

Fuel distribution.

Terminals.

Ships.

Trucks.

Civil unrest.

The 1994 volcanic eruption that buried much of Rabaul.

Rebuilding.

Expansion across Papua New Guinea.

Hundreds of employees.

A business that somehow kept growing while the Pacific repeatedly demonstrated that it had absolutely no interest in anybody’s strategic plan.

And then another generation arrived.

One of my sons eventually became CEO.

Which brings us to yesterday.

At a Saunders family wedding, amid all the usual ingredients of a family celebration — speeches, photographs, relatives rediscovering one another and people trying to remember precisely how everyone is related — my son happened to meet Tony Saunders.

Someone took a photograph.

Two men stand beside one another, smiling at the camera.

On its own it is simply a pleasant wedding photograph.

Except it isn’t.

Standing there is the current CEO of Islands Petroleum beside the man whose arrival in Rabaul was part of a chain stretching directly back to the early days of the business.

Behind Tony stands Bruce.

Behind Bruce stands Keithie.

Behind Keithie stand Alvin and Gertrude Blum.

Behind Alvin lies wartime Guadalcanal and then the extraordinary decision to return to the Solomon Islands and make a life there.

From Keithie the line runs to Bruce.

From Bruce it runs to his recommendation that Tony go to work for Rodney Hancock.

From Tony it reaches Rodney in Rabaul.

From Rodney came R.K. Hancock Agencies and Gazelle Agencies.

From Gazelle Agencies came Islands Petroleum.

And beside Tony at the wedding stands the CEO of that company today.

No board meeting could have designed that succession.

No consultant could have put it into a thirty-year strategic plan.

It is too improbable.

It is too Pacific.

The islands have always worked through relationships. Ships carried people from one colonial outpost to another. Someone met someone in Honiara, who knew someone in Rabaul, who had a job for somebody from somewhere else.

Families crossed borders that barely seemed to exist.

People married.

Children grew up.

Companies changed names.

Countries became independent.

Volcanoes erupted.

Governments changed.

The radio gave way to the mobile phone, the telex to email and the ledger book to the cloud.

But underneath all the technology ran something older.

People.

And introductions.

I sometimes think businesses like ours are presented too neatly when their histories are written.

There will be dates of incorporation, acquisitions, terminals opened, volumes sold and directors appointed.

All important.

But they leave out the real machinery.

Someone saying:

“I know a fellow who might be useful to you.”

That sentence has probably built more Pacific businesses than any management textbook ever written.

Alvin Blum could not have known, when he returned to the Solomon Islands in 1954, that his daughter’s future husband would one day recommend his brother for work in Rabaul.

Bruce Saunders could not have known that sending Tony in Rodney Hancock’s direction would become part of a family connection that would still be visible generations later.

Rodney Hancock could not have known that the agency he was building would eventually be bought by a young accountant and grow into a substantial Papua New Guinean fuel company.

I certainly could not have known, when I bought Gazelle Agencies in 1980, that decades later my son would be running the company.

And my son could hardly have expected to attend a Saunders family wedding and find himself standing beside Tony Saunders, one of the human links stretching all the way back towards the beginning.

Yet there they are.

One photograph.

Two men.

Several generations.

Two Pacific nations.

And roughly seventy years of history squeezed into the space between two smiles.

Perhaps that is the real saga of the Pacific.

Not empires, corporations or grand plans.

Just people crossing one another’s paths, occasionally changing the direction of somebody else’s life without even realizing they have done it.

And every now and then, many decades later, history has the good manners to bring two of them together at a wedding and pose them for a photograph.

1964-1965

India to png

Panchgani to goroka

The journey home to PNG from Indian boarding school was less a school holiday and more a multinational refugee operation.

Our American headmaster didn’t like us very much.

To be fair, I don’t think he liked children generally.

For the entire trip from India to Papua New Guinea he gave us 20 rupees — about five Australian dollars or two pounds ten in those days.

Generous if your destination was across the road.
Less convincing for a week-long international migration.

The first problem was the two coolies carrying our enormous metal trunks on their heads up to the bus station. Their fee consumed most of our travel budget before we’d even left the mountain.

The bus trip down the Western Ghats was cheap enough:

* endless hairpin bends,
* overheating brakes,
* dust,
* vomiting passengers,
* and the occasional glimpse of eternity over the cliff edge.

Eventually we arrived at the great dusty chaos of Bombay bus terminal with a financial position best described as:
catastrophic.

We didn’t even have enough money to get to Colaba where our guardian lived.

Adding to the challenge:
he had absolutely no idea we were coming.

The headmaster didn’t like our guardian either, so communication between the two men had apparently ceased somewhere around the Suez Canal.

At this point Brother Michael spotted a girl from St Peter’s School — Freddy Mercury fame no less — and with the sort of financial diplomacy normally associated with IMF negotiations, we pooled our remaining funds and shared transport.

Currency restrictions in India then were serious business.

Before departure our guardian gave us:

* seven rupees each,
* one British pound,
* and what I assume was his blessing to survive somehow.

From Bombay we boarded a BOAC Comet 4:
Bombay → Madras → Singapore → Darwin → Brisbane.

More than 24 hours flying time.
Nearly three days travelling once time zones, delays and confusion were included.

The BOAC hostess effectively became our guardian.

Singapore was still considered part of Malaya in those days and represented unbelievable modern luxury to two boarding school boys who immediately escaped supervision and wandered into the domestic terminal to the hostess's horror.

The squat toilets fascinated us completely.

Young boys are easily entertained.

Eventually we reached Brisbane where our guardians met us with a birthday cake for both of us.

After India, Bombay bus terminals and international poverty, this felt like arriving at Buckingham Palace.

Most importantly:
we felt safe again.

Then came the midnight DC6B flight north to Port Moresby arriving around dawn.

Our guardian there ran a "lolly-water" factory, which to children sounded approximately equal to Willy Wonka.

Soon after we boarded the old DC3 to Goroka.

Now THAT was flying.

The door whistled constantly, the cabin rattled like loose farming equipment and as we squeezed through the mountain passes it honestly felt you could reach out and touch the trees.

Modern aviation is far too comfortable.

Then finally:
Goroka.

Mum and the family waiting at the airport.

That scene out the window became one of the defining moments of my childhood, repeated three times a year for the next six years:
the long journey home from boarding school finally ending in the Highlands.

Altogether the trip took nearly a week.

Today children complain if the in-flight entertainment stops working for ten minutes.

We crossed half the planet with one pound, seven rupees, two metal trunks and a BOAC hostess trying unsuccessfully to keep track of us.

1964

India

New Era school

People occasionally ask why my parents sent me to a Bahá’í boarding school in India when I was only ten years old.

The short answer is:
they thought it was a good idea at the time.

The longer answer is more complicated and probably says a lot about the optimism of that generation of pioneering Bahá’ís scattered around places like Papua New Guinea in the 1960s.

PNG was still emerging from patrol-post days, roads were rough, secondary education options limited and my parents belonged to a religion that thought internationally before globalization became fashionable. India, to Bahá’ís then, was not some strange foreign place — it was part of a spiritual and cultural map stretching from Haifa to New Delhi to Port Moresby.

Besides, Bahá’í schools had a reputation for discipline, service, multiculturalism and high ideals.

My parents probably imagined:

* thoughtful teachers,
* character building,
* world citizenship,
* and polite young scholars discussing unity of mankind beneath banyan trees.

What they actually got was me.

At ten years old I was dispatched from Canberra to the Western Ghats of India carrying a metal trunk, several emotional deficiencies and absolutely no understanding of geography.

In those days parents simply posted children around the Commonwealth like parcels:
“Air mail if possible, surface mail if necessary.”

Modern parents panic if a child walks to the corner shop unsupervised.
Mine exported me internationally.

And to be fair, the school did shape me.

By twelve I could:

* survive on almost no money,
* negotiate with bus conductors in several accents,
* sleep anywhere,
* recognize institutional curry at fifty paces,
* and navigate Bombay bus terminals with the instincts of a minor criminal.

It was less “privileged education” and more “junior foreign correspondent training.”

The Bahá’í influence itself was actually profound.

At school there were Indians, Persians, Africans, Europeans, and assorted international waifs all thrown together in one strange little experiment in unity long before multiculturalism became government policy.

Religion there wasn’t narrow. It was broad, international and idealistic. You grew up assuming the world was interconnected because your classmates literally came from everywhere.

Of course at ten years old I mainly noticed:

* homesickness,
* steep ghats,
* squat toilets,
* strange food,
* and the alarming speed of Indian buses.

But in hindsight my parents were doing something rather brave.

Or reckless.

Possibly both.

They belonged to a generation that believed children gained resilience through exposure to the world rather than protection from it.

So they sent me to India.

And somehow between the homesickness, the chaos, the trains, the boarding school discipline and the travel between Goroka and Bombay, I quickly became independent.

Slightly damaged perhaps.
But independent.

1964

Himalaya ss

On my way to India



The decision to go to png and India
It was 1963 and mum and dad headed off to religious conferences in London and Israel. I was parked with my favorite grandma in sydney.Dad was a delegate from Australia to elect the first world governing body of his religion in Israel whilst mum accompanied a full blood aboriginal to the conference in London, people of many countries gathered and in a Kumbaya moment a teacher from an international school in India from their religion suggested my mother send her boys to his school, “sure “ the throw away line !
After the conference, a call was made for volunteers to png highlands, unfunded a volunteer needed a job, undaunted my dad sold his comfortable accounting practice in Canberra and started looking for work.
Out of the blue 1963, this Parsi teacher turned up in Canberra to collect his promised students and my naive parents sent my 10yo brother with him, I was too young (9) apparently !
The next year when I turned 10 I foolishly asked to go and in due course my mum and I caught a boat to India, to drop me off,.. cheaper than a plane.
My father finally got a job as executive officer with the coffee marketing board in goroka and they were off.
My home ran away from me when I was ten.

No sooner did I get to this international school than I asked to leave but as my parents were moving countries we had to wait !
My parents arrived in png in feb 1965 and we were now invited to join them which we did
Me on the mv himalaya enroute to Bombay

1964

National Hotel

The connections



The National Hotel — A Strange Thread Through My Life

Some places you pass through once and forget. Others somehow keep reappearing in your life until you begin to wonder whether they have been quietly following you around.

For me, one of those places is the National Hotel in Poona — now Pune — just opposite the railway station.

As a schoolboy in India, I would pass through Pune on my way from boarding school to Bombay for the holidays while my parents were living in Papua New Guinea. I had no idea that this hotel across from the station would later become tangled through my family, my business, my friends and several generations of people I knew.

Fast forward to 1977.

I started work with Cox Johnston in Lae, where we had a mixed-race secretary named Mary. At the time she was simply Mary from the office.

Then I moved to Rabaul and discovered that Mary was actually the natural mother of two boys who had been adopted by John and Ruhi Mills — John being the man from whom I would later buy Gazelle Agencies.

That story itself began at the National Hotel.

Years earlier, John and Ruhi had been holidaying there with their young son Leroy. Tragically, while the ayah's attention was elsewhere for a moment, Leroy drowned in the hotel pond.

You could hardly imagine a more terrible holiday memory.

Later, Mary was working at Gazelle Agencies and had a child by a man who was not her husband. John and Ruhi adopted the little boy and, in memory of the son they had lost in Poona, named him Leroy.

Mary later had another son in similar circumstances, and John and Ruhi adopted him too. He was named Vahid, although today everyone knows him as Nick.

And Nick, decades later, became our Brisbane boarder.

We still keep in touch.

So the little boy adopted by the previous owner of the company I bought, whose natural mother had once been my secretary, eventually ended up living under my roof in Brisbane.

Try drawing that family tree after a couple of glasses of wine.

Then there is the Yaganegi connection.

Nick's cousin Jamil Yaganegi worked for me as an accountant. He married Meena, who is a cousin of my sister-in-law Kaity Bluett, still in Lae. Jamil and Meena ran the Alotau Bakery for many years and later moved into printing, office equipment and related businesses, and they are still there.

Meanwhile, the National Hotel itself had begun around 1895, established by an Iranian, Khosrow Farahmand.

His great-grandson Mehraban later became the father of some of my children's cousins in Rockhampton.

How?

Mehraban's wife is the sister of my wife's former husband.

Naturally.

At this point you really do need a whiteboard.

Then yet another strand appeared.

Kim, who recently passed away, had a son, Dinesh. Dinesh's wife Annissa is a Gushtasbi Parsi, and her father is now involved in plans to renovate the National Hotel.

The hotel had, in the meantime, passed into the Yaganegi family, linking it back yet again to people who had worked for me and married into families connected to ours.

So a hotel I used to pass as a schoolboy travelling through Poona has somehow woven itself into my later life through an Iranian founder, a drowned child, two adopted sons, my first accounting job, Gazelle Agencies, the man I bought the business from, a Brisbane boarder, an accountant who worked for me, relatives in Lae, cousins in Rockhampton, my wife’s former in-laws, a Parsi family, and now a proposed renovation.

When I was standing outside Pune railway station as a schoolboy waiting for a train to Bombay or a bus back to school in Panchgani, I couldn’t possibly have imagined any of this.

Back then the National Hotel was simply a building across the road.

Nearly sixty years later, it looks more like a junction box for half my life.

1964

Ss Himalaya

Three Lemons, a Penny and a Passage to India

Three Lemons, a Penny and a Passage to India

Tuesday, 13 October 1964 was the day I set off to discover the world—a journey that would ultimately lead me to Papua New Guinea.

Today, sixty-two years later, it is once again Tuesday, 13 October. I'm currently in Singapore, itself one of the way stations on my journey to PNG. An appropriate coincidence with which to begin—but I digress. At seventy-two, digressing is one of the privileges I intend to exercise.

We were booked aboard the SS Himalaya, sailing from Sydney to Bombay. I was ten, and the prospect of weeks aboard an ocean liner was almost unbearably exciting.

We stayed overnight at my grandmother's house in Sydney. She came to the quay to see us off, as did my mother's aunt, whom we called Auntie Mate.

Once aboard, I set about exploring the whole ship. We travelled second class, but I could see nothing second class about this adventure.

Our cabin steward was a very nice Indian fellow from Goa. He was among the first of the many people from different walks of life I would meet on this journey. The world was already becoming much bigger than the one I knew.

Then I discovered the swimming pool, and my interest in the rest of the ship temporarily evaporated.

At the pool I met two boys, John and Peter. We became the terrible trio—a small organisation with plenty of initiative and very little supervision.

Beside the pool was a bar. Some Aussie gentlemen were travelling only from Sydney to Melbourne, something you could do by ship in those days. They began throwing shillings, sixpences and threepences into the water for us to dive for.

This struck me as an excellent arrangement. Swimming was enjoyable enough, but being paid to do it suggested a promising career.

My haul amounted to two shillings and sixpence.

Once we were three miles offshore, the pokie room opened. There was no restriction on a young person going in, so I took my earnings along to investigate another branch of the maritime economy.

I fed my money into a poker machine.

Before long, three lemons appeared in a row.

Then, just like in the movies, coins began pouring out.

My winnings were somewhere between ten and twenty pounds sterling. I was ten years old and suddenly in possession of a fortune. All that diving, and it turned out the real money was in fruit.

When we reached Melbourne, the crew emptied the swimming pool and stretched a cargo net over it.

To an adult, this was presumably a sensible precaution. To the terrible trio, it was a trampoline.

We put it into service immediately.

One of my more enthusiastic friends jumped onto a corner close to me. The rope broke. He rolled into the net, while I fell into the empty pool and landed heavily on one arm, spraining it.

Our first engineering project had failed its practical test.

I didn’t spend a penny of my winnings while aboard, except on one memorable occasion involving a girl called Penny.

John and Peter had made friends with her. The arrangement was that, for a penny, she would get into a cupboard with the boy in question and give him a kiss.

Having successfully entered the worlds of paid diving and gambling, I felt ready to investigate romance.

I paid my penny and took my turn.

Once we were in the cupboard, Penny said, “Can we just talk for a while?”

Perhaps my two friends had exhausted her enthusiasm for the original arrangement. Perhaps she thought I looked like someone capable of conversation.

Either way, I had paid for a kiss and found myself at a meeting.

When we reached Perth, Mother had arranged for a Bahá’í friend, John Handley, to collect us and show us around.

The memory that has stayed with me is of the park beside the river and admiring the swans. After the excitement of the ship, it was a quieter pleasure—and one that required neither loose change nor medical attention.

Back aboard, we occasionally became bored. Even an ocean liner could apparently run short of entertainment for three boys determined to make their own.

Morning and afternoon tea trays were left outside passengers’ cabins. The sugar came in cubes.

We raced around scooping them up and stored our haul in a drawer in one of my cupboards.

Why? I couldn’t tell you. We had discovered something we could collect, and that was sufficient. Somewhere aboard the Himalaya, passengers were drinking unsweetened tea while three boys quietly accumulated a sugar reserve.

As we approached the equator, stories circulated about the traditional crossing ceremony and people being dunked.

Given my recent experience with the pool, I had already contributed enough to the ship’s aquatic entertainment.

Fortunately, they had lightened up the ceremony, and we had a big party instead. It marked my first crossing into the Northern Hemisphere—another line crossed in a world I was only beginning to discover.

Then came Colombo, in Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was called in those days.

A small outrigger canoe came alongside the ship, carrying women selling handicrafts. From over the side, I admired a lovely, elegant carved bird and asked its price.

“Ten shillings.”

I walked away.

The price dropped to seven and six.

I walked away again, then came back.

Five shillings.

I departed once more.

Finally, she offered it for two shillings and sixpence, and I accepted.

Thus began my life of bargaining. My technique was simple: keep leaving until the price became interesting.

Later that day, Mother returned with a carved bird of her own. She was pleased with herself, having bargained the price down to seven and six.

I reached into my drawer and produced mine.

“Two and six.”

There are few pleasures quite like being ten years old and discovering you have outmanoeuvred your mother. I enjoyed that one thoroughly.

A Bahá’í friend from Colombo organised an outing, and we went to a restaurant for morning tea. There I found further opportunities to put my pokie winnings into circulation.

I bought a lion carved from heavy, heavy teak, with ivory teeth, and an antelope covered in fur.

The lion cost twenty-four shillings. Even with my newfound wealth, that was a serious purchase. Apparently, I was prepared to walk away repeatedly over a bird but pay handsomely for a lion.

I treasured those animals for many years.

Our next stop was Bombay. Friends collected us and gave us a tour of the city. My brother met us there, and then we made our way by car towards Panchgani.

On the journey, we stopped at the National Hotel in Poona, where we had friends. Among my memories of that stop is rose-flavoured cordial—another unfamiliar taste in a journey full of them.

By now it was the end of October, and we arrived at the school.

It was nothing like what I had expected.

One of my first challenges was the food. I had been accustomed to Irish stew; now I was trying to get to grips with curry. Discovering the world was all very well, but I hadn’t fully appreciated that I would have to eat it too.

In a few weeks, I had met a Goan cabin steward, formed the terrible trio, earned money diving, won a fortune from three lemons, sprained an arm, paid Penny for a conversation, collected other people’s sugar, crossed the equator and beaten Mother at bargaining.

Now came school.

But settling into life at Panchgani is another story.

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1964

Mahableshwar or bust

The bike ride was fun for a while

Breaking Bounds

Tonight, Joanne Bluett, 13, is off to a junior youth class with Annabelle Mihrshahi, the great-granddaughter of Mr Mihrshahi, who owned the Lucky Restaurant in Panchgani.

That name takes me straight back to a Saturday when Michael and I decided the school boundaries were unnecessarily restrictive.

So we broke bounds.

Our first stop was the Lucky Restaurant for supplies before our grand expedition to Mahabaleshwar, twelve miles away. Mr Mihrshahi was a Bahá'í, which we hoped meant he would feed us without dobbing us in. Fellowship was welcome. Communication with the headmaster was not.

Then down to the market for sugarcane juice, squeezed through a hand-operated mechanical crusher. For about 25 naye paise—roughly sixpence—you could watch someone do a considerable amount of work to produce your drink. About the same price as a bottle of lolly water at the North Goroka theatre, although there the hard work was opening the bottle.

Properly provisioned, we hired two bicycles and set off for the big town.

Two white boys on hired bikes. Indian roads. No permission. What could possibly go wrong?

There were buffaloes pulling carts piled with hay, bus and truck drivers apparently working towards a personal best, and endless pale-coloured Ambassador cars. They looked like London taxis from about 1948, and every one seemed determined to occupy the bit of road we were using.

We pedalled on, displaying the confidence that comes from having given a situation absolutely no serious thought.

Eventually, the heat began to interfere with our pioneering spirit.

We stopped and reassessed the mission. Did we actually need to reach Mahabaleshwar? Surely the important thing was that we had demonstrated we could set off for it.

Point proved. We turned around.

A successful expedition, judged by the very reasonable standard that we both came back.

Years later, Mr Mihrshahi’s son, Dinya, took a teaching job at Kwikila High School in Papua New Guinea. Now Dinya’s son is taking my daughter to class, and Annabelle is part of the next generation keeping the connection going.

All those years ago, I was sneaking out of class and hoping the Mihrshahis wouldn’t tell anyone.

Tonight, they’re helping get my daughter to one.

The family has finally got a Bluett travelling in the right direction.

1964

Tigers bathing and post scripts

Get me outer here

Not long after my mother returned to Australia, we received an aerogram announcing that my parents were planning to move to Papua New Guinea. They were looking for a job and expected to be there in the new year.

At about the same time, I was sending a message in the opposite direction: “Get me out of here.”

There was, however, a small administrative obstacle. Our letters home had to be submitted for checking, so you couldn’t say anything negative about the school. Parents could therefore be reassured that their children were happy—the unhappy bits never made it into the envelope.

But I discovered a loophole. They checked the letter, but not a P.S. added afterwards.

So beneath my carefully inspected correspondence, I added:

“P.S. Get me out of here. They check our letters.”

My first attempt at evading censorship. I was ten.

After the food, my second shock was the bathing arrangements.

The bathroom consisted of four walls and no roof. Apparently, you could wash while it was raining, which seemed to make some of the plumbing redundant.

We were assigned a middle-aged ayah—a nanny—to help with bathing. She heated the water on a wood-fired stove and supplied it for my wash, which, from memory, happened about once a week.

She also offered to bathe me.

Now, I might have been ten, homesick and struggling with the curry, but I felt reasonably qualified to wash myself.

We had no common language, so declining her kind offer required some diplomatic gestures. Nevertheless, I believe I made my position clear: I would accept the hot water, but retain responsibility for the boy.

My third shock involved the local wildlife.

Our classroom stood near the edge of a steep valley, with the ground dropping away below us. One morning, on the next level down, we discovered the head of a calf. Its ears were missing.

I was informed that a tiger, a leopard or some other local animal was responsible. The identification seemed rather casual to me. I would have appreciated considerably more precision about what was eating cattle in the vicinity of my classroom.

There was quite a long walk from the main school area back to our dormitory at night. Until then, it had simply been a long walk in the dark.

Now it was a long walk in the dark with something out there that had already demonstrated a worrying interest in beef.

I was ten, and suddenly very conscious of being smaller than a calf.

I felt my P.S. had been entirely reasonable.

1964

12th October

Canberra to Bombay via sydney

Sixty-two years ago today—12 October 1964—I left home and my family to go to boarding school in India.

I was TEN. Ten, for God’s sake! What were they thinking? Most children that age were being told not to cross the road alone. I was being sent across the Indian Ocean.

My brother Michael had gone a year earlier, and I’d been told I had to wait until I was ten. Apparently nine was too young, but ten qualified you for international relocation.

Michael said he was okay there. That was reassuring. Our entire overseas school assessment seemed to consist of: “Michael’s still alive and says it’s all right.”

The date is forever etched in my memory, because I was wildly excited. We flew to Sydney—only my second time on a plane—and then boarded the P&O liner Himalaya. My first sea voyage! This wasn’t merely going to school. This was an expedition, with homework waiting at the other end.

Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, then Colombo in what was still called Ceylon. By the time we reached Bombay near the end of October, I’d done enough travelling to qualify for long-service leave.

Then up into the mountains to Panchgani, a hill station roughly 4,300 feet above sea level. Clearly, sending me to another country wasn’t sufficient. They also had to put me on top of one.

Mum stayed for a few weeks, easing me into my new life before leaving me there with Michael.

Looking back, I marvel at the confidence of my parents—and my own complete lack of concern. I wasn’t dwelling on the distance from home or the years ahead. There was a plane, an enormous ship, strange ports and a brother waiting in the mountains.

At ten, I thought I was setting off on the greatest adventure imaginable.

At seventy-two, I’m still wondering who approved the paperwork.
Next stop png

1964

Lucknow engineer

House mother for a homesick boy

The Lucknow Engineer

Some friendships begin in the most unlikely circumstances. Mine with Rezwan Menezes began with a homesick ten-year-old boy and a baby who was still waiting to make her entrance.

The family story, as I remember it, started with a Muslim engineer from Lucknow who became a Bahá'í. He had married a village girl who had received no formal education, and together they had a bevy of daughters.

Then he went away on a work trip to Lucknow and never returned.

His wife was left with the girls and an uncertain future. The Bahá'í community arranged for the family to find refuge at New Era School in Panchgani, where the daughters could receive an education.

One of those daughters was Rezwan. She trained as a teacher and married George Menezes, the school's mature and formidable sergeant, responsible for discipline.

When I arrived at New Era, I had come from Australia, while my family was on its way to Papua New Guinea. Rezwan was pregnant and took pity on this homesick white boy, who was beginning to wonder whether boarding school had sounded rather better in the brochure.

Their apartment became a refuge. I was always welcome, and Rezwan became my unofficial "house mother".

She offered kindness, sympathy and somewhere to feel at home. Naturally, I rewarded her by asking about the birds and the bees.

She politely demurred.

Even with the evidence developing directly in front of me, I apparently required a full briefing.

George was another matter. I was rather frightened of him. His wife provided comfort; her husband encouraged us to consider the consequences.

This was particularly relevant to our nocturnal mango expeditions.

Near the girls' dormitory stood mango trees, which we climbed at night to collect unripe fruit. The location was incidental to the catering arrangements, although I appreciate that this defence might not have survived questioning.

We ate the mangoes with salt. Delicious—but the sap from the skin burnt our lips, so our stolen feast came with its own disciplinary measures.

Occasionally George would patrol beneath us.

We froze.

There is nothing quite like sitting motionless in a mango tree, lips burning, while the school's chief disciplinarian walks underneath. You develop a remarkable respect for silence, balance and the load-bearing capacity of a branch.

By day, I was welcome in his home. By night, I preferred that he remain unaware of my whereabouts.

George and Rezwan later left to teach at a school in Sikkim. In one of those connections that keep appearing in Bahá'í life, my nephew's future bride was also teaching there.

That marriage eventually ended, and he later married a Papua New Guinean woman. At Mum's funeral recently, I met the granddaughter—another generation appearing in a story whose beginnings stretched back to my schooldays in India.

I caught up with George and Rezwan in Delhi a few years ago. George has since passed away, but Facebook helps me keep in touch with Rezwan. The homesick boy is now a grandfather himself, yet she remains my house mother in memory.

And the baby she was carrying when she befriended me?

Gloria, now Gloria Javid, who serves on the International Teaching Centre at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa.

Her mother gave a lonely little boy a place to feel safe. Her daughter now serves the worldwide community.

I'm glad the birds-and-bees discussion never progressed to a prediction of what the baby might become. I was having enough trouble understanding how she got there.

1964

How Mum Became a Bahá’í

Dad told mum to organise moving to png

How Mum Became a Bahá’í

Dad liked a big announcement. Which is precisely why Mum kept it to herself when she decided to become a Bahá’í.

Margaret Mason was 18 and training as a nurse in Manly in 1951. The night shifts could run twelve or thirteen hours. The hospital was short-staffed, and she was already looking after patients who died on her watch. She found herself wondering what happened to them after they died. It was a question she carried long after she took off her uniform.

Then along came Noel Bluett. On one of their first outings, Dad took Mum to the Mitchell Library and showed her The Seven Valleys and The Hidden Words. He asked what she thought.

“Interesting,” she said.

As Mum admitted in her memoir, she was eighteen and at that particular moment she was more concerned about whether she was wearing the right dress to meet his mother.

Back at the hospital, between shifts, she read a book called Portals to Freedom. What she read about life after death stayed with her. She remembered walking through Sydney feeling as though “golden rain was bucketing out of the heavenly realm.” When she tried to tell her friends at the hospital what had happened, she burst into tears. They felt sorry for her, which was about as far from how she felt as you could get.

She decided to keep the news from Dad for a bit. In her words, he was “a man always on stage.” She could just imagine him announcing to his friends that he had “a good contact.” Mum wanted to meet the other Bahá’ís on her own terms. Dad had introduced her to the Faith. She’d do the rest herself.

They married in 1952 and went to Leeton as Bahá’í pioneers. That’s where my older brother Michael and I were born. Years later, when Mum read the Bahá’í message calling for pioneers to Papua and New Guinea, she was the one who brought it up with Dad.

“Yes, we should,” he said. “You organise it.”

She did. She ordered a newspaper from PNG, spotted a job advertisement for the Coffee Marketing Board in Goroka, and showed it to Dad. That was how our family ended up in the Highlands.

I like that little bit of family history. Dad was the one who first said, “Have you ever heard of the Bahá’í Faith?” And Mum was the one who found the job ad that took us to New Guinea.

1965-1971

Goroka part time jobs

Seven Jobs Before I Finished School

GOROKA JOBS — 1965–71

I rolled into Goroka yesterday, and the moment we crossed the Asaro River it felt like coming home.

The town was a beehive of activity. Outside the Bird of Paradise Hotel, I even bought a bird of paradise—Goroka marketing at its most efficient.

Between 1965 and 1971, while still at school, I managed to collect seven part-time jobs. Child labour laws were apparently still making their way up the Highlands Highway.

My first job, organised by Mum, was assembling pushbikes beside the Farmers and Settlers building. The building is still there, now serving as the Town Council headquarters. The bicycles, presumably, are still awaiting final tightening.

Next door was the New Guinea Company, where Mr Guest paid me about 30 shillings. I can’t remember exactly what I did, but at that age the important thing was that somebody paid me to do it.

Dad then arranged a job selling programs at the Goroka Show. The programs cost two shillings and sixpence, and I received sixpence from each sale. With my earnings I bought a leather-covered Sanyo transistor radio—or a “tranny,” as we innocently called it then. The word has since found an entirely different occupation.

I kept that radio under my pillow at boarding school to ward off homesickness. It was cheaper than therapy and had better music.

Then came three years at Steamies, where I worked among the toys, freezers and menswear. This gave me a broad retail education: how to entertain children, preserve meat and dress men—though not necessarily in that order.

At Plantation Service and Supply, I repaired and replaced hand-operated coffee-berry crushers. One day I fell through the ceiling and landed above the manager downstairs. A beam saved my life, although it showed considerably less concern for my crotch.

My boss was remarkably patient. He also rescued me from a bully at the swimming pool, Michael Spriggs, so I forgave him for employing me in a building that was clearly not designed to carry my weight.

But my favourite job was carrying passengers over Daulo Pass to Chuave. I was only 16 and driving on a slightly “adjusted” licence. Where was child protection? Probably in the back, paying the full fare.

The fare structure was a triumph of Highlands mathematics:

$2 from Goroka to Chuave.

$1 from Goroka to Watabung.

But only 50 cents from Watabung to Chuave.

Go figure. Apparently, the further you travelled, the less the second half of the road was worth.

The boskru and I received 25 percent of the takings from a 60/40 split. I never completely understood the arithmetic, but Dad did. He was always much better with numbers than I was—which may explain why I was driving the bus and he was counting the money.

Then, sadly, we moved to Lae, and my glorious Goroka working life came to an end.

Seven jobs before I had properly finished school, a fudged driver’s licence, a damaged crotch and a radio under my pillow.

Those were the days when Goroka didn’t just raise children—it put them straight to work.

Photos

Hagen Show

Now enroute to lae

1965-2026

Lik Lik Cloudy

Pidgin and its quirks

LIKLIK CLOUDY

On my recent Airlines PNG flight, the expatriate pilot came over the intercom with a reassuring weather report:

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is liklik cloudy at our destination.”

Not cloudy liklik.

Not i gat liklik klaut.

But the magnificent expatriate hybrid: liklik cloudy.

After enough years in PNG, expatriates become convinced they speak fluent Tok Pisin. We learn six useful words and scatter them through English like seasoning.

“The flight will be delayed liklik.”

“We have a liklik technical problem.”

“Please wait liklik.”

And the most dangerous phrase of all:

“Mi save.”

That usually means, “I understood about 40 per cent, but I’m too embarrassed to ask again.”

Then there is the great PNG curse of distance: “longwe liklik.”

To a new expatriate, that sounds like it is only a little way away. In reality, it can mean three mountains, two rivers, a broken bridge and six hours in the back of a Land Cruiser.

We soon discover that liklik is an extremely flexible unit of measurement. A liklik delay can be ten minutes, three hours or until tomorrow. A liklik pothole can swallow a Land Cruiser. A liklik rain can wash away the bridge. And a liklik problem can require the provincial administrator, three police vehicles and a compensation payment.

Still, the pilot landed us safely through the liklik cloudy, after only a liklik delay.

Tenkyu tru, Captain. Your Tok Pisin may have been liklik mixed up—but your flying was nambawan! ✈😂

1965-2026

Mums passing a mini eulogy

She didn’t go quietly

She didn’t go quietly.

At 93, Margaret finally laid down her sword last night, but anyone who knew her knows she made Death work hard for the victory.

One of my favourite memories is of her 50th birthday. Most people celebrate with cake, candles and perhaps a nice dinner. Mum celebrated hers on Makati Island in the Kombe area of Papua New Guinea, where the mosquitoes are so ferocious that the locals build their houses virtually over the water on tiny islands to escape them. If you arrived by canoe, the first thing to disappear wasn’t your luggage or your wallet—it was your knife. Someone always seemed to need it more than you did.

Not content with surviving the mosquito capital of the known world, Mum also thought it a splendid idea to be dropped off by Dad in his tail-dragger Cessna 182, Romeo Oscar Papa, at Baimuru in the Gulf Province. From there she paddled by canoe between Bahá’í villages, cheerfully doing what she loved most—meeting people, encouraging communities and making friends wherever she went.

Naturally she became sick.

The local mission station, perhaps assessing both her condition and her determination, seemed somewhat reluctant to take responsibility for her. One suspects they realised that if they admitted her, she might reorganise the place before she left.

Dad had promised to return a week later. Unfortunately, torrential rain closed the airstrip. A NOTAM was issued. Civil Aviation, air traffic authorities and common sense all agreed that nobody should be landing there.

Dad disagreed.

He flew in anyway.

The landing reportedly involved enough slipping and sliding to earn the admiration of his adventurous sons and enough alarm to earn a stern rebuke from Civil Aviation. Mum climbed aboard, no doubt entirely unruffled, and the two of them flew off into the sunset as if this sort of thing happened every Tuesday.

Which, for them, it almost did.

As we sat around her bedside in recent days, watching her stubbornly resist every invitation to leave this world, I realised that the same woman who survived

mosquito-infested islands, Gulf swamps, dubious airstrips, canoe journeys and countless PNG adventures was never going to surrender easily.

She fought to the very end.

And somewhere, I suspect, she’s already telling the angels that their procedures could be improved, their seating arrangements reorganised, and that if they really want to get things done properly, they should perhaps find a canoe and visit a few villages.

Farewell Mum. You lived bravely, laughed often, loved deeply, and turned ordinary lives into extraordinary adventures. ❤

1965-2026

Odyssey

To goroka I return

Odyssey

My life in PNG has been something of an odyssey—and, like Odysseus, my mission has always been to get back home. In my case, not Ithaca but Goroka.

In the old days we had cinemas in North Goroka and Fourth Street, Lae. The newsreels reminded us that somewhere over in New Zealand the cows were still being milked every day. If a snake appeared in the main feature, however, the PNG audience went completely berserk. Forget Dolby Surround Sound—the crowd provided it.

Yesterday I bought 18 tickets to Odyssey for our head-office staff, Foundation, HR and marketing—mostly women. Beforehand, I sent out a little WhatsApp précis so everyone would have a basic grasp of Greek mythology.

This turned out to be rather unnecessary—for them.

Paradise Cinema at Vision City now has three screens, proof that PNG has survived videotapes, DVDs and streaming and rediscovered the pleasure of sitting together in the dark for three hours.

My education was not especially classical, but the PNG crowd was completely absorbed: monsters, gods, Hades and assorted Greeks behaving badly. We occupied two full rows and had a wonderful time.

Afterwards, two Foundation girls, Denise and Talitha, who lived some distance away, came home with us for a sleepover. They had all come straight from work, so Kavi whipped up some late-night instant noodles while the girls began the official post-mortem.

They discussed tiny details and mythological connections I had barely noticed. Denise, it turned out, was already well versed in Greek mythology.

So much for my helpful WhatsApp briefing. I was the one who needed the précis.

They all loved the film—and today my own odyssey continues.

We are off to the Hagen Show, then I’ll inspect our new fuel depot. From there, a security vehicle will take us to Goroka, where I’ll show my new wife all the places where I lived, went to school and played.

Then it’s down Daulo Pass, which I travelled daily in a PMV back in 1970, a night at the Bird of Paradise, and on Tuesday Guard Dog Security will drive us down Kassam Pass to Lae.

Odysseus took ten years, fought monsters and lost most of his crew.

I’ve taken about sixty years, built a few fuel depots, acquired a crew of 650 and acquired a security escort.

But at last, my odyssey back to Goroka will be complete.

1965

Coffee plantation

Disneyland with mud

Coffee plantations. For a boy from town this was Disneyland with mud.

Dad was executive officer of the Coffee Marketing Board, which meant he floated around the plantation world of the Eastern Highlands like some sort of caffeine diplomat. Near Henganofi on the Dunantina River lived the Kingsford Smiths — yes, apparently related to that Kingsford Smith crowd — and one glorious school holiday I scored a sleepover there.

Every dream an adolescent boy could have arrived at once.

First: horses. Not gentle pony-club horses either. Proper plantation horses galloping between rows of coffee trees while I bounced around pretending I was a cowboy of the Highlands.

Second: motorbikes. A 50cc Honda which in my memory now had approximately the horsepower of a fighter jet. Flat out through the coffee blocks, dust flying, workers laughing, me convinced I was Evel Knievel with school fees.

Then there was Kesavaka buying coffee. Gordon, Leafric's older brother, was about fourteen and therefore perfectly qualified by PNG standards to drive a ute overloaded with coffee bags and human beings. The boss crew rode in the back sitting on sacks like kings of the mountain.

At one stop we parked beside the road and the entire edge collapsed beneath us. The ute slowly started rolling sideways down the slope. Before I could even panic, Leafric launched himself like a state of origin rugby tackle, grabbed me and hurled me out the back to safety while the boss crew rolled around inside the tray laughing hysterically like they were on a ride at Luna Park.

No one was hurt. The ute probably survived from sheer embarrassment.

Plantation life was another world. Labourers were paid ten shillings a month plus provisions, tobacco sticks and assorted essentials. Dinner meanwhile was formal enough for Buckingham Palace. Napkins in silver holders. Waiters in laplaps gliding silently around the table while muddy teenage boys tried not to inhale soup through their noses.

Out in the shed some enormous tractor drove a long rubber belt connected to mysterious machinery that seemed to power half the district. Everything smelled of diesel, wet earth and coffee pulp.

And the coffee itself fascinated me. The ripe red cherry had this sweet sticky layer inside. Ferment it, dry it, hull it, and somehow it became parchment, then green

beans, then finally the roasted miracle. Dad had a little roaster at home and when he fired it up the whole house smelled like heaven had opened a café.

To this day, whenever I smell fresh coffee, I’m not in Brisbane or Sydney.

I’m back in the Highlands, hanging onto a tiny Honda, dodging coffee bushes, nearly dying in a rolling ute, and thinking life could not possibly get any better.

1965

Lloyd Hurrell

Coffee board

LLOYD HURRELL
by Margaret Bluett, Cairns – 24 May 2012

“Our family’s relationship with Lloyd Hurrell lasted professionally for ten years—from 1965 to 1975—but as a friendship it lasted much longer than that.

He was the first Chairman of the Coffee Marketing Board in Papua New Guinea and in that capacity we first met him on the Goroka Air Strip in 1965 when he helped us off the plane. It was a free and easy airport those days, with no security or restrictions. I remember him saying, “You weren’t afraid to come here with Sukarno threatening to invade us?”

My husband was appointed as the first Executive Officer of the newly formed Coffee Marketing Board and it was obvious to me from that day onwards Lloyd cared a great deal for our welfare. He was particularly concerned about our five young children, forced to live in an upstairs apartment with nowhere for them to play. As soon as he could push it through Government circles, a four-bedroom house in a large garden was built especially for the Executive Officer and his family.

My husband said that in Lloyd’s role as Chairman of the Coffee Board he was completely and absolutely committed to the task of steering the coffee industry from its infancy in 1950 through to Independence in 1975.

It might be interesting to note that the coffee industry was one of the most successful undertakings in the world, turning thousands of indigenous subsistence farmers into prosperous coffee growers in such a short period of time. This success was in no small way due to Lloyd’s untiring, dedicated, intelligent and enthusiastic support.

Lloyd was a humble man who never wanted to acknowledge the credit he deserved. His constant efforts to understand the industry he steered saw him reading everything he could find to assist him, both as a coffee planter himself and in his administrative role. When he was awarded the OBE for his work with the industry he told my husband:

“This award is typical of what they say about this thing. OBE stands for ‘Other Bugger’s Efforts’ and it should also be given to you because without your help I wouldn’t have been able to do this.”

Lloyd Hurrell was a sensitive, caring man who was a gentleman in the true sense of the word, emboldened by old-fashioned virtues and a work ethic that was hard to

find amongst men of European origin who lived and worked in Papua New Guinea before, during and after the Second World War.

Lloyd was a vital cog in the machine that helped turn a land of tribal people into an independent nation. His family and those who knew him in his glory years will sorely miss him.”

I drove past the site of his Kosali plantation Wau yesterday although nothing is left to indicate its presence.

1965

Life in png

A reply to a reader clarifying

Suzie, you're probably right… and also gloriously wrong at the same time. 😂

PNG in my life was never just "traditional singsing, bilums and betel nut" — although there was certainly enough betel nut spit on PMV floors to qualify me for honorary citizenship. PNG for many of us expat kids was exactly this strange multicultural soup where nobody quite matched the brochure.

PNG wasn't a backdrop. It was the glue.

Where else could a Scots-Australian bloke educated in India marry an Indian-Malaysian woman, raise a family involving PNG, Chinese, German, Polynesian, Māori, Sri Lankan and Tolai influences, while feeding half a village during State of Origin from a volcano refugee house powered by a generator and satellite dish held together with fencing wire and optimism?

That is PNG to me.

PNG was:

* haus meris arriving before relatives,

* every child in the street wandering into your kitchen without knocking,

* learning that "I'm just coming" might mean tomorrow,

* finding out your stolen property could sometimes be returned with an apology and bananas,

* discovering your social status depended entirely on whether your freezer worked during a blackout,

* and measuring wealth not by money but by how many people turned up when things went wrong.

PNG culture also quietly absorbs people. After enough years there, you stop being entirely from wherever you came from. You become something else. A bit blurred around the edges. You think in Tok Pisin rhythms. You judge distance by PMV time, not kilometres. You can identify provinces from accents at the market. You know which uncle is "dangerous after SP". You own more eskies than furniture.

So yes, my stories probably do read like a multicultural family memoir because that's honestly what PNG often produced — accidental tribes of people stitched together by geography, chaos, humidity and survival.

A lot of younger people understandably look for “authentic PNG” through a more modern cultural lens, but for many of us the PNG experience was this odd shared frontier existence where Australians, Chinese, Islanders, Indians, Europeans and Papua New Guineans all collided in ways that would never happen elsewhere.

Frankly, normal countries separate themselves far more efficiently. PNG just threw everyone in the pot and said:

“Right, power’s off, volcano erupting, boat’s late, somebody kill a chicken and we’ll sort it out.”

And somehow we did. 😂

Also, if my life sounds confusing, imagine living it:

One son at a Canadian Bahá’í school,

another child rescuing a Sri Lankan nanny from a Cairns swimming pool,

Tamil being spoken in a Kokopo kitchen,

140 villagers watching State of Origin in my lounge room,

and me trying to explain to Australians why a tramp steamer full of diesel once felt like the most important event on earth.

That probably is generational too.

A lot of us who grew up around PNG didn’t see race or nationality first because everybody was already mixed into everybody else’s stories.

PNG wasn’t just a place we lived.

It was the giant communal cooking pot we all accidentally fell into. 🍲🇵🇬

Suzie Barton

1965

Bono

The knight

SIR BONO AZANIFA – THE KNIGHT OF KESAVAKA

Every district has its legends. Kesavaka has Sir Bono Azanifa.

If you happen to attend a big gathering in the Dunantina-Kesavaka area, don't be surprised to see an elderly gentleman arrive wearing enough medals and decorations to make a small military parade feel underdressed. While others may slow down in their late eighties, Sir Bono still carries himself like a man who once helped change the course of his district's history—and, to be fair, he did.

Long before coffee became king in the Eastern Highlands, Sir Bono was telling anyone who would listen that coffee was the future.

"Plant coffee," he told them. "You will have stores, cars and all things."

The remarkable thing is that people listened.

He planted coffee, distributed seed, taught villagers how to pulp and dry beans, travelled around Henganofi spreading the gospel of Arabica, and eventually helped lay the foundations for an industry that would transform the Highlands.

But Sir Bono was never just a coffee man.

He was a luluai, a traditional leader, a member of the House of Assembly, a member of the Coffee Marketing Board and, later, one of Papua New Guinea's colourful elder statesmen.

And colourful is exactly the right word.

One of the best stories comes from the early 1960s when Sir Bono was serving in the House of Assembly. During a visit to Goroka, he went to the pictures with Margaret Bluett, wife of the Coffee Marketing Board's Executive Officer. In those colonial days, cinemas were still unofficially divided between "European" and "Native" seating.

Sir Bono and Margaret ignored the arrangement and sat themselves comfortably in the best seats in the house.

The cinema owner soon marched over and informed Sir Bono that he would have to move to the "native" section.

Unfortunately for the owner, he had chosen the wrong lady to argue with.

Margaret calmly informed him that representatives of the United Nations Trusteeship Council would soon be visiting Papua New Guinea. She further

explained that the delegation included African members and that she would personally make sure they heard every detail about racial segregation in his cinema.

The owner suddenly developed a much more flexible seating policy.

Sir Bono remained exactly where he was.

The movie continued.

Everyone else in the theatre watched the exchange with great interest, and from that day forward people discovered that perhaps seating arrangements were not quite as fixed as they had once seemed.

Margaret later delighted in telling the story, usually accompanied by fits of laughter and a colourful description of the cinema owner that became more entertaining with every retelling.

It was a small moment, but a memorable one. Sir Bono had spent much of his life helping people gain confidence in a new future through coffee. On that evening, without saying very much at all, he also helped demonstrate that dignity and respect belonged to everyone.

Today, the coffee trees he encouraged people to plant continue to bear fruit across the Highlands. The industry he helped nurture supports thousands of families. And in Kesavaka, the old knight still wears his medals proudly.

After all, if you've helped introduce coffee to a district, served your people in parliament, guided a major industry, and accidentally helped desegregate a cinema, you've probably earned the right to wear a few medals

My second visit to kesavaka was trying to buy coffee from his village and rolling down the hill with my mate in a tackle out of a Ute roll over, somewhere near this hut which was built for us to attend a sing sing in his village but keep that for another story

1965-2026

Madina — bilas peles

Summer holidays with the Homerang family



Madina 65-66 ?

MADINA — BILAS PELES

Some of my earliest summer holidays in PNG were spent at Madina, about 60 miles from Kavieng.

The hamlet where we stayed is called Panaweiwaai.

Bilas peles — beautiful place — hardly does it justice. Gorgeous beaches, an idyllic tropical lifestyle and fruit that tasted as though it had been invented there. Everything seemed to grow, and everything tasted better than anything you could buy in a shop.

We stayed with the Homerang family in their fairly humble home. There was a concrete water tank, but for a proper bath we would walk to the next village and wash in a creek fed by a mountain spring — crystal clear and absolutely freezing.

I must have decided fairly early that I belonged there, because I left a mattress behind for my next visit.

A little presumptuous, perhaps. Most guests leave a toothbrush.

At the centre of Madina life was Michael Homerang, a visionary man and the leading Mai Mai, or chief. Madina had six clans, each with its own leader, with one recognised as pre-eminent.

Michael had been a teacher at Brandi High School in Wewak. He heard that a good friend from his time in Manus had discovered a religion that seemed to fulfil many of the ideas Michael himself had been searching for.

It was the Bahá'í Faith.

Michael embraced it enthusiastically and, remarkably, much of Madina followed.

This apparently caused some concern within the Australian administration. Madina had been reluctant to abandon customs that earlier missionaries wanted people to give up, and suddenly here was a new religion that didn't require them to discard their culture.

According to my mother's recollection, one response from the administration was to establish a high school at Madina.

If that was intended to change the direction of the community, it certainly had an interesting result.

Education became enormously important to these families — including education for girls — and Michael had a swag of daughters.

Looking back, it helps explain why so many of the children from those Bahá'í families went on to remarkable careers. Among Michael's extended family were people who worked internationally, in government and academia — including DFAT in Dubai and language studies at ANU — while another served as Secretary for Labour through successive governments.

Bahá'ís don't involve themselves in party politics, but somehow Madina still managed to become very well connected.

Our old friends Rodney Hancock and Sister Vi Hoenke were also part of this story. They introduced a way of thinking that seemed to fit Madina rather than trying to remake Madina to fit somebody else's way of thinking.

The connections eventually reached right to the top.

When Michael's wife died, Sir Michael Somare came to her funeral. Somare's son Arthur had married one of Michael's daughters.

At the funeral I contributed K50 in appreciation of all those years when the Homerang family had welcomed me into their home.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way I made a joke about Somare being on the K50 note.

It wasn't one of my finer contributions to cross-cultural diplomacy.

After decades in PNG, you'd think I would know when to keep my mouth shut.

Apparently not.

Still, apart from that little diplomatic incident, everything went well.

And whenever I think of Madina, I don't remember politics or important people first.

I remember the Homerang family's hospitality, the mattress waiting for my return, those magnificent beaches, tropical fruit straight from the tree, and walking down the road for a bath in that freezing, crystal-clear mountain creek.

Bilas peles indeed.

1965-1971

Sun-kissed summers drifting on the Asaro

Truck inner tubes and the annual Asaro rafting race

Sun-Kissed Summers Drifting on the Asaro

There was a time when the Asaro River was more than a ribbon of muddy water winding through the Papua New Guinea Highlands — it was a playground, a proving ground, and, for a lucky few, a first taste of adventure.

Long before helmets, guides, or GoPros, we had truck inner tubes and the reckless confidence of youth. The Highlands air was thinner back then, or perhaps it only felt that way because life itself seemed to move slower, freer, untouched by the rush of the world beyond the mountains.

Every wet season, when the Asaro’s flow increased just enough to make it fun the boarding school brats and kids from the mission would gather for what we proudly called gumying.

Our rafts were black rubber rings salvaged from old vehicles, still smelling faintly of oil and dust. We'd spend hours patching the punctures, pumping them by hand, and then carrying them down to the riverbank where the race would begin.

Among the group that year was my blond Baptist missionary girlfriend — sun-kissed, laughing, and fierce as a river current herself. She could out-swim half the boys and didn’t mind getting her hair tangled in the reeds. Together, we launched into the Asaro, bobbing downstream through eddies of brown water, dodging branches and laughing until our stomachs hurt.

The annual rafting race was the highlight of those Highland summers. The juniors and seniors would line up, a motley crew of barefoot competitors, hearts pounding in rhythm with the water. That year, I took the junior title — more by stubborn paddling than skill — while Michael Bromley, strong and sure, claimed the senior crown. There were no trophies, no official timing, just handshakes, applause, and the sweet satisfaction of a day well spent. We dried off on the riverbank, skin sticky with sunlight and silt, and shared cold kau kau and stories that seemed to stretch as far as the hills.

Looking back, those days feel like a photograph left too long in the sun — faded, but still glowing at the edges. The Asaro’s water may have darkened over the years, the world may have grown faster, but in memory, the river still flows steady and brown, carrying the laughter of a generation that once thought adventure was nothing more than a tube, a current, and the courage to drift.

1965

The Place

Margaret Bluett — Highland town of Goroka, where the Bluetts landed and promptly ignored the advice never to stay in a village.



Kesavaka Village Bena, Easter 1965 . Right to left Greg six years, Bono Azanifa, Dianne eight years, Margaret. Sharon four years and Bono's youngest wife — he had three.

When my family arrived in what was then known as the Territory of Papua New Guinea, twenty years after the Second War ended in the Pacific, the country was beginning to display the effects of a fresh approach in the way Australia administered the country. During the first ten years, the Administration focussed on a reconstruction process which entailed a mopping up of the damage done during the war years. Repairs were carried out in the major towns and affected villages but evidence of the war was still visible in the main towns and along the coast. Many places had witnessed and experienced the effects of hand to hand fighting, bombing raids, and devastation to crops, the subsistence people depended on. Coastal seas were peppered with rusting warships; towns were destroyed and hills around Rabaul were honeycombed with tunnels the Japanese built to escape the American bombing raids. Many buildings erected as temporary structures during the war proved to be useful even after the war ended; the Quonset huts in Manus and Angau Hospital wards in Lae (built of pre-fabricated structures erected by soldiers), Marsden Matting, that ubiquitous piece of crafted metal used by the Americans to

create instant landing sites for aircraft and paths, was used all over the country to create walkways through mud.

There were sadder traces of war in the major towns; such as cemeteries, rusting guns, and unexploded bombs. The memories of war last for generations and stories in the minds of veterans, who came to love the country and became soldier settlers, were told to anyone who would listen to them. There were reports of the lack of compensation for old men in villages never rewarded for the role they played and the losses they sustained during the conflict. Nevertheless, the new policy approach with a limited budget attempted to address the major issues outlined by the Minister of External Territories E.J. Ward in September 1945,

'This Government is not satisfied sufficient interest had been taken in the Territories prior to the invasion by the Japanese or that adequate funds had been provided for their development and the advancement of the native inhabitants ... advancement can be achieved only by providing better health, better education and for a greater participation by the natives in the wealth of their country and eventually in the government.'

Government policies, however positive, were insufficient to change the negative attitudes of many expatriates in Papua New Guinea. The first Baha'i pioneers who arrived in the nineteen fifties suffered from the effects of social segregation and were punished for their attempts to socialise with local people. But that is their story, this story begins in 1965 when the second wave of pioneers began to arrive. The country was still regarded as an Australian Territory and it was relatively easy for Australians or New Zealanders to settle in either Papua or New Guinea providing they had sufficient income to sustain themselves or prior employment with either the public service or private companies. These institutions were expected to provide their employee's incomes, housing and expenses for travel and children's education. Thus, the later pioneers met better conditions than those who arrived in the 1950s.

On our arrival in Port Moresby, in the mid nineteen sixties, we found a town resembling in many ways an Australian country town, with a couple of hotels, timber buildings, tropical style houses for expatriates, some tarred roads, an efficient airport, and other modern facilities. However, the big difference between Australian towns and those of Papua and New Guinea were the large number of local people who congregated in the centres in a process known as urban drift. Villagers, particularly young males, were leaving their homes to find work. Many gained employment and worked as house servants, gardeners, or employees in government services such as the police or security and some worked for missions, schools, or other charitable organisations but there were insufficient positions to accommodate all the unemployed individuals.

The Administration relied heavily on Christian Missions for their contribution in providing schools, aid posts and other benefits especially in remote areas. Mission policy therefore continued to resist any attempt to introduce enlightenment ideas such as the Baha'i concept that all humanity belonged to the same family or that all the prophets of God received their teachings by divine inspiration. To Christians

there was only one way, that of Jesus and the Bible, and they maintained the belief that only Christian Missions should be allowed to establish centres in Papua New Guinea. Because the Government needed them the Missions had a powerful influence on policy and practice even into the mid twentieth century but were subject to some restrictions. Missions were not allowed to proselytize in territory regarded as belonging to a different mission, a policy referred to as 'spheres of influence'. This policy came into the language of the administration when religious conflict between Missions arose during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Lieutenant Governor Sir William McGregor, who arrived in Moresby in 1888, set in motion policies he hoped would keep the peace including the 'spheres of influence' which restricted missions from trying to gain converts in areas already settled by other missions. Sir Hubert Murray who succeeded him as Governor of Papua in 1908 continued to honour this policy as well as positive concepts of his predecessor such as involving Papuans in development projects such as establishing plantations and the practice of diplomatic mediating between various missions. A public servant in Moresby told me that Sir Hubert Murray declared his administration would not do to the Papuan people what we had done to the Aboriginal people of Australia. They did not intend to alienate people from their land nor disperse tribal people to other areas unless it was necessary.

The policies set in place by these two governors still influenced the attitudes of missionaries in the nineteen sixties who felt they had the right to prevent the introduction of new ideas or religious practices in their area. Consequently, after the London Missionary Society bequeathed their territory to Anglicans they were the prevalent mission in Papua, the Lutheran heritage from the German occupation prevailed in Northern New Guinea while Catholicism was predominant in New Britain, Wewak, and the Sepik region, while Methodists prevailed over areas in Milne Bay. After two world wars this policy weakened considerably and other Christian sects began to establish organisations wherever they found an audience. However, it was still difficult to teach anything other than Christianity and this affected the first pioneers who found indignant opposition to their teaching in most areas. However, it worked in favour of teaching in the areas where the Missions did not treat the people well or gave the impression missionaries were superior to the 'native population'. Conflict between Methodists and Catholics in New Ireland, for example, led to the ideas of the Faith appealing to those who had suffered from the prejudice of one group against another.

Patronizing and negative attitudes towards local people still existed among many expatriate groups in the 1960s. Papua New Guinea adult males were still called boys and collectively local women were known as 'meris' in the 1960s and many individuals who worked for the benefit of local people tended to adopt a paternalistic approach. Security issues in Moresby and Lae were prevalent in the talk of expatriates as large numbers of unemployed youth, without support of their families or their own land, turned to stealing to survive. Newly arrived expatriate women were warned by those who had arrived years earlier to act in a modest manner so as not to attract the attention of local men either unemployed youth or

house servants. Female clothing showing too much skin was frowned upon by older ladies even though the coastal climate was hot and humid.

Shops were mainly trade stores with a few department stores in major centres belonging to Burns Philp and Steamships, both long term trading companies in the Pacific. The planes arriving in Moresby from Brisbane were mostly DC 6s and internal travel between towns was mostly in the DC 3s that were used during the war, a few still had side saddles for seating. Smaller planes were used in the interior or on the coast and provided a panoramic view of the countryside but a bumpier ride for passengers. All cargo from overseas arrived by ship in the three major ports, Moresby, Lae and Rabaul. Cargo for the interior was carried in big planes which if I remember correctly were De Havilland aircraft able to carry large quantities of food and equipment.

My family's experience in Papua New Guinea began in February 1965 after my husband secured a position in the Highland town of Goroka as the first Executive Officer of the Papua New Guinea Coffee Marketing Board. Many people in our hometown of Canberra were surprised at our seemingly sudden departure from that of a secure future and a safe suburban life amongst friends and relations to the remote mountains of New Guinea. My husband had a flourishing Accountancy Practice in Canberra and our five children were in good schools; in fact we lived with conditions that most of the population of Australia would envy. The question our friends who were not Baha'is asked us: 'Why are you doing this?'

We were responding to a call from the Universal House of Justice made in 1964 after they had been elected at the International Conference in Haifa in 1963. They made teaching plans for all the National Assemblies in each country which were announced to the delegates attending the National Conventions held during Ridvan. As mentioned in my previous book 'Birds into Paradise', the Australian plan had eighteen goals, nine of which applied to the Faith in Papua New Guinea. Australian believers were given the task of parenting the community towards its maturity — that is the establishment of its own National Assembly and all that implies.

It took us three days with night stopovers in Brisbane, Port Moresby and Lae to arrive at our destination in Goroka, travelling on the final leg in a DC 3 sitting side saddle. Not long after we arrived the Podger family also arrived and settled in Moresby. Seven pioneers were already living in the country when we arrived, six in Rabaul and one in Lae, but no pioneers resided in the Highlands. We were excited at the prospect of living in untouched territory, convinced it was our duty to pioneer and delighted with the idea of being in a completely different and adventurous environment. We were young and naïve enough not to think about the problems we would encounter, absolutely devoted to the Faith, confident we would be protected and assisted by Divine Assistance when endeavouring to play a role in the establishment of the New World Order through the teachings of Baha'u'llah.

Most of our experiences on arrival in Goroka were printed in 'Birds into Paradise', no need to repeat them here, however it is feasible to repeat the notion that we found ourselves in a Shangri-La type environment containing approximately two

hundred expatriates and un-numbered thousands of Highlanders who lived in villages surrounding the township. Some young men worked in town as cook boys, houseboys, gardeners, or government service employees but the majority went home at night leaving the township enveloped in an eerie silence and I learned in those first few months what it felt like to be a stranger in a strange land.

The scenery we found in Goroka was so magnificent it almost defies description; the paradise described in the Koran comes to mind. There were gardens beside which rivers flowed, dark eyed maidens and no doubt many were virginal, protected for their commercial value as brides. They walked the streets together on market days wearing minimal clothing of swaying skirts and bosoms adorned with necklaces of beads and shells. Flowers, fruit, and vegetables flourished in the rich black volcanic soil and magnificent mountain ranges of varying hues stretched into the distance in every direction. The climate was idyllic, misty mornings, sunny days with low humidity, cool nights, and refreshing breezes. Most of the year it rained in the night or late afternoon and in the wet season it poured down in torrents of sparkling water that turned the roads into seas of mud and the channels, known as barets, flowed beside the streets into clear streams. The township of Goroka was orderly and peaceful and I felt blessed to be a pioneer in such beautiful surroundings.

The town resembled an island surrounded by mountains with one hotel, three trade stores, an outdoor market and tree lined streets of houses built for expatriates, mostly timber with some made of red bricks. The original settlers built a small brick kiln to make bricks for official buildings but it didn't last long, timber was easily available and economical. The centre of town included the District Office, a small Post Office, a Police Station, a flag pole and three small churches — Anglican, Catholic and Lutheran — demonstrating the main mission influences in the area. Every morning and evening the Australian flag was raised and lowered without the help of a bugle but a small contingent of police in uniform would march up and down along the hundred yards of tarred road intending to give the impression the Australian Administration was present and in control, determined to maintain the peace.

The people who lived in the surrounding villages fascinated me. They looked very friendly, smiled easily. They walked through town in groups heading for the market, the obvious gathering place, chattering and laughing amongst themselves and greeting each other affectionately. Occasionally groups in ceremonial costume would dance through the town beating their drums, including bride price processions which traditionally carried items such as pigs, vegetables, feathered headdresses, or shells but after the arrival of paper money it was included threaded on long bamboo poles.

During our first year, we lived in a modern second storey apartment in the centre of town, a red brick building belonging to the Farmers and Settlers Association. I was grateful to be so comfortable in our pioneering post but felt lonely at night because as newcomers we were not included in the expatriate social life of the town and were thus rather isolated in our apartment. When the Coffee Board hosted a cocktail

party to welcome us we realised we were different to most expatriates in town; we didn't consume alcohol, didn't want to play golf and were anxious to meet local people. However, we needed to learn more about the local cultures and learn to speak Pidgin before we could fulfil our role as pioneers to convey the Message of Baha'u'llah to the Papua New Guinea people.

We felt the need during that first year to meet other pioneers to compare experiences and make friends with local Baha'is. To do this we decided to travel to Rabaul and New Ireland during our first leave to attend the second Summer School in Madina held at the end of the year. My husband, Noel, had attended the first Summer School in 1964 and returned home with glowing reports about his experiences with the friends in Rabaul and Madina. He planned to open an Accountancy Practice in Lae and was preparing his departure from Canberra in January 1965. A week before he left he received the offer of employment with the Coffee Board who requested him to come immediately. Thus, we were enabled to travel together as a family with travel expenses covered and a rent-free town apartment waiting for us.

Although we did not suffer from physical difficulties in the Highlands I found it difficult to understand and approve of the attitude of the expatriates in Goroka with whom we were expected to socialise. I was rather disturbed to find the terminology used by business people and other town folk towards local people was often derogatory and demeaning. The social segregation between the local people and the expatriate community was not enforced or policed then but we were told by numerous voices it was not advisable to visit villages or to mingle with local people outside the town.

We ignored the warnings about visiting villages and during our first Easter we asked one of the local members of the Coffee Board, whom we were asked to respect as representatives of local coffee growers, if our family could stay with him in his village. He was Bono Azanifa, a big man in his area, and his village was Kesavaka in the Bena district on the side of the Dunantina River.

The first Europeans or explorers came hoping to find alluvial gold in the Highlands and their assumption was correct because Bono showed us a gold nugget as big as a packet of chewing gum he found in the river. We talked to him about our Faith but he never displayed any interest in religion, however he remained our friend because we respected him and took the trouble to listen to him and hear his life story. He told us about his father who he said was a great warrior who had killed many of his enemies. Our children adapted quickly to the village and enjoyed themselves playing with the local children and swimming in the river. Bono's village was beautifully maintained with a grass square in the centre and coffee gardens surrounded the attractive bush material round houses. Bono delegated his three wives to take care of us and these women kept us supplied with constant buckets of hot water for washing and cooked us delicious meals.

I think we took the advice of the expatriate members of the Coffee Board to respect the local members of the board further than they had anticipated. Noel was reported

to the Administration, by a coffee planter, for exposing his wife and children to danger by allowing them to live in a village well away from any official protection. We informed the Coffee Board members we were treated with gracious hospitality and the utmost care during our stay in the village. In addition, Noel told them our children had a wonderful time with the local children and there were no more critical comments made officially. As we continued to visit villages and broke the social segregation rules by inviting local people into our apartment our children suffered from teasing at school about their parent's relationship with local people.

Despite this disapproval from some individuals not everyone took a negative attitude towards our life style and we made friends amongst our white neighbours and business associates including the coffee planters and their families. We became involved in activities in the town. I became hostess of the Country Women's Association House and the Association Secretary. I was appointed President of the Girl Guides Association and Noel became Treasurer of both the Agricultural Show society and Rotary; nevertheless by the end of our first year we looked forward to getting away from the interminable cocktail parties we were expected to attend and the pressure to join the golf club.

Sources referred to in this chapter: James Sinclair, 1985, 'Papua New Guinea the First Hundred Years', p. 79, Pub. Robert Brown and Ass., Bathurst, Australia; and John Garrett, 1992, 'Footsteps in the Sea, Christianity in Oceania prior to World War II', Pub. Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

1965

The place

Why are we here

STORY ONE — PREQUEL

Why on Earth Are You Going There?

I missed the family's first arrival in Papua New Guinea.

Which, considering PNG subsequently consumed most of my life, was rather inconsiderate of them.

It was February 1965. I was away at boarding school in India while Mum, Dad and three of my siblings were beginning what everyone back in Canberra probably regarded as a temporary attack of insanity.

Dad had a successful accountancy practice. We had a comfortable suburban home. Us kids were in good schools. Canberra was safe, respectable and predictable.

Then my parents announced they were going to New Guinea.

"Why?"

This was apparently the most common question.

It was a reasonable one.

In 1965 Papua New Guinea was still an Australian Territory. The Pacific War had ended only twenty years earlier and its remains were everywhere. Rusting ships lay in coastal waters. Japanese tunnels honeycombed the hills around Rabaul. Old guns sat rusting into the jungle. Aircraft wrecks disappeared slowly under tropical vegetation.

Marsden matting, designed by the Americans to make instant wartime airstrips, had been recycled into bridges, paths, fences and anything else that required a piece of steel with holes in it.

Nothing was wasted in PNG.

Not even wars.

The country Australia was administering was changing rapidly. Roads, hospitals and schools were being built, but in many places the missions still provided much of the education and health care. Towns such as Port Moresby, Lae and Rabaul had something resembling modern infrastructure, while only a few miles away most people continued to live essentially village lives.

Into this world came my parents.

Not as missionaries in the usual sense.

They were Bahá’ís.

That was part of the problem.

The established churches had divided much of Papua and New Guinea into informal religious territories over many decades. Lutherans here, Catholics there, Methodists somewhere else, Anglicans elsewhere.

Apparently even God had zoning regulations.

The Bahá’í idea that humanity was one family and that the great religions shared a divine origin did not fit neatly into anybody’s allocated paddock.

The first Bahá’í pioneers who arrived during the 1950s discovered that fraternising too enthusiastically with Papua New Guineans could also upset parts of the expatriate establishment.

My parents therefore arrived with exactly the wrong qualifications for fitting into colonial society.

They didn’t drink.

They didn’t play golf.

And they actually wanted to meet Papua New Guineans.

Three strikes before they had unpacked.

Dad, Noel Bluett, had originally been thinking of opening an accounting practice in Lae. Then, almost at the last moment, he was offered the position of first Executive Officer of the Papua New Guinea Coffee Marketing Board.

The headquarters were in Goroka.

Today you get on an aeroplane, complain about the food and arrive.

In 1965 the family journey took three days.

Brisbane.

Port Moresby.

Lae.

Then up into the Highlands in a DC-3, an aircraft that had already performed distinguished service in the Second World War and apparently saw no reason to retire merely because peace had broken out.

Some still had sideways seating.

You sat looking at the passenger opposite while the aircraft bounced its way through the mountains.

Very sociable.

Possibly less so if somebody was airsick.

And then suddenly there was Goroka.

The Highlands must have been extraordinary to anyone arriving for the first time.

After the tropical coast, the aircraft climbed into great folds of mountains and valleys. Goroka sat about a mile above sea level, surrounded by mountain ranges changing colour with the light.

Cool mornings.

Warm sunny days.

Mist.

Flowers everywhere.

Rich volcanic soil.

Coffee.

Clear streams.

And thousands of people living in villages throughout the valleys and hills around a tiny administrative town containing perhaps two hundred expatriates.

Mum described it as Shangri-La.

The township itself was hardly enormous.

One hotel.

A few trade stores.

A market.

Government offices.

Police station.

Post office.

Three churches.

A flagpole.

Every morning and evening a small group of uniformed police marched along the short stretch of tarred road while the Australian flag went up or came down.

Empire condensed into about a hundred yards of bitumen.

Dad’s job brought the family into immediate contact with the coffee industry. Coffee planters, government officers and businessmen formed much of the expatriate social world.

The official welcoming ritual was therefore inevitable.

Cocktail parties.

Unfortunately my parents didn’t drink.

Then there was golf.

They didn’t play golf either.

This was potentially serious.

In expatriate New Guinea, refusing both alcohol and golf was perilously close to declaring yourself ungovernable.

Their apartment was comfortable, on the upper floor of a red-brick building belonging to the Farmers and Settlers Association, but Mum sometimes felt isolated at night.

During the day thousands of Highlanders came into town to work or attend the market. In the evening many returned to their villages and Goroka became strangely quiet.

Mum began learning Tok Pisin.

More importantly, she and Dad wanted to meet the people beyond the polite handshake in town.

This made some expatriates nervous.

They were warned not to visit villages.

Don’t wander around.

Don’t mix too freely.

Be careful whom you invite home.

Newly arrived women were given particularly stern advice about dress and behaviour.

There was, of course, another possibility.

Ignore everybody.

My parents were quite good at that.

Dad represented the Coffee Marketing Board, which included Papua New Guinean coffee growers. One of those members was a man called Bono Azanifa from Bena.

Bono was what people called a “big man” — not necessarily because of physical size, but because he had influence, standing and responsibilities in his community.

He lived at Kesavaka Village beside the Dunantina River.

(I drove over it the other day enthusiastically informing Kavi but the significance and history were lost in her.)

Easter was approaching.

My parents decided they would like to spend it in a village.

Not visit for afternoon tea.

Stay.

With the children.

Overnight.

Several nights.

This was not what the people who had advised Dad to “respect the local Coffee Board members” had meant.

They meant shake hands.

Perhaps have a cup of tea.

Certainly not move the Bluett family into the village.

Dad asked Bono anyway.

Bono said yes.

And so at Easter 1965, barely weeks after arriving in the Highlands, Margaret and Noel Bluett packed up three small children and headed into Bena.

Greg was six.

Dianne eight.

Sharon four.

Mum went too, obviously.

I was still marooned in India, missing all the fun.

There is a photograph from that Easter.

Mum standing with the children and Bono Azanifa.

Beside them is Bono’s youngest wife.

He had three wives.

Already PNG was proving considerably more interesting than Canberra.

What nobody in that photograph could possibly have known was that this little family experiment — ignoring the warnings, leaving the expatriate enclave and going into a village as guests — contained the seed of almost everything that came later.

Certainly everything that came later for me.

Because when I finally arrived in Papua New Guinea, I discovered my parents had already broken the first rule.

They had crossed the invisible line.

And once the Bluetts crossed a line, we rarely bothered going back.

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1965

Look and Learn

But leave off the lights

Look and Learn

School holidays were approaching at New Era, and there was a small administrative problem: nobody seemed to have worked out what to do with Michael and me.

We had nowhere to go.

Then the librarian announced something considerably more serious. The library would be locked for the holidays.

No Look and Learn.

Accommodation was one thing, but depriving two growing boys of their favourite educational magazine? Surely there were limits.

Michael and I developed a plan. While the library was still open, we quietly unlocked a window. A nearby low roof provided access, and after closing time we returned, scaled it and let ourselves in.

A perfectly reasonable response to an educational emergency.

Our mistake was turning on the light.

We had mastered the entry, the climb and the window, then illuminated the entire operation for the benefit of passing school authorities.

Sidney—sorry, Dr Dean—sprung us.

There we were, caught red-handed, reading.

Other boys might have been stealing money or smoking behind the dormitories. We were committing aggravated education. Our thirst for knowledge knew no bounds, although apparently it was supposed to respect library opening hours.

Meanwhile, the holiday problem remained. Our guardian, Sheriar, had been dismissed from the school by Dr Dean and was no longer going to Bombay for the holidays. That left our billeting arrangements somewhere between “unresolved” and “perhaps they’ll disappear.”

Dr Dean was relatively new to the Bahá’í Faith. From our youthful perspective, his understanding of universal love was receiving a fairly vigorous practical examination. Whatever psychological skills he possessed, Michael and I were clearly testing the outer limits.

Within seven years of dealing with us, he died of a heart attack. I make no claim that the events were connected, although when I later met his wife, Isobel, at a youth conference in Hawaii, her account left me wondering whether our names had featured prominently in the household's more exhausted conversations.

I remember looking into her eyes and thinking: Were we really that bad?

We had only wanted to read a magazine.

Eventually, we were sent off on our four-country odyssey home, with twenty rupees from Dr Dean.

Twenty rupees. Two boys. Four countries.

Even then, that seemed an optimistic travel budget.

Whether it was a generous contribution towards our journey or a modest investment in getting us off the premises, I shall never know.

But we certainly lived up to the magazine's title.

We looked. We learned.

We should have learned to leave the light off.

1968-2026

The Night Mum Desegregated the North Goroka Cinema

As mum lay dying a story came out about her principles and standing up for them

As we sat around the aged-care bed watching Mum decline slowly, as her life ebbed away , the signs were all there. The breathing was laboured, the fever persistent, and the morphine drive was being topped up yet again, as her determined old body continued fighting the inevitable.

Gathered around were two daughters, a granddaughter and yours truly. Conversation drifted, as it often does in families, back to old stories. Before long we were retelling the famous Goroka cinema incident.

Both my sisters had been there and, as happens with eyewitnesses, each remembered it slightly differently. What nobody disputed was that it perfectly captured Mum’s character. She possessed an inbuilt allergy to injustice and an unfortunate tendency to challenge authority figures who were convinced they were right.

The discussion then moved to the old soft-drink hierarchy of colonial New Guinea. The locals could buy lolly water for five cents, a cordial dispensed into recycled beer bottles. Expats enjoyed the luxury of an ice-cold Fanta for twenty-five cents. We occupied the awkward middle ground, clutching our warm thirteen-cent wholesale cans stored beneath the house.

We were never quite expatriates and never quite locals. We spent most of our childhood somewhere in between, trying to fit in with our school friends while simultaneously absorbing the culture of the country that had adopted us.

As independence approached, many expatriates headed for the airport carrying one-way tickets and gloomy predictions. Mum had other ideas.

“Paul,” she said, “take citizenship.”

It wasn’t the easiest decision. Visas became more complicated, travel became more complicated, and explaining yourself to immigration officers became more complicated still. But I took her advice and never looked back.

Mum’s friendships were not confined to the expatriate community. One of her local friends suggested a business opportunity to Dad. Being a husband, Dad naturally assumed it was his idea all along.

To be fair, Mum was every bit as entrepreneurial as he was. More importantly, she frequently acted as the moderation committee for some of Dad’s more imaginative schemes. Looking back, her greatest commercial contribution may well have been preventing a number of spectacular disasters.

That one opportunity led to another, and another after that. In a curious chain of events it opened doors for me that are still opening today.

Now the tide has turned. My new wife is launching a charity and I occasionally find myself offering advice, caution and the odd reality check. Whether she pays any attention remains to be seen.

As Mum rests quietly a few feet away, it is impossible not to reflect on how much of our lives flowed from decisions she made, friendships she nurtured and opportunities she encouraged others to seize. The business opportunity suggested all those years ago created ripples that are still spreading across generations.

But the story of how those ripples led from a coffee-growing valley in the Highlands to a charity in Port Moresby is probably a tale for another day.

1968

Bono

Drama at the north goroka theatre

As the news reached friends this morning that Mum is not doing well, one of them shared this story. It deserves a place here, so I retell it.

Like how she and her Highlands guest desegregated the North Goroka Cinema in the 1960s.

The guest was one of the then-new indigenous coffee farmers my father was mentoring. When they arrived at the cinema, they sat in the “European” section where the best seats were. In those colonial days New Guinea was racially segregated, but it was also a United Nations Trusteeship.

The whole row of white people got up and moved away, my younger sister was so ashamed of them.

When the Australian owner told Mum’s guest to get up and move to the “native” section, Mum informed him that United Nations Trusteeship representatives would be arriving the following week, that there were Africans in the delegation, and that she would make sure they heard exactly how his cinema operated.

Faced with the prospect of international attention, the owner suddenly became much more flexible.

They watched the movie in peace. Every other Papua New Guinean in the cinema saw what had happened, and apparently nobody was ever again quite so keen to tell people where they had to sit.

The best part of the story was always Mum’s retelling of it. She would be giggling before she reached the end and would invariably describe the cinema owner as:

“That stupid man.”

My parents were different. Good different.

Dad believed in equality, justice and human dignity.

He also believed that paying cinema prices for soft drinks was daylight robbery.

So whenever we went to the North Goroka Cinema, he would march us in carrying warm bottles or cans of Fanta purchased elsewhere for the princely sum of 13 cents.

The challenge for us children was not drinking the Fanta. The challenge was concealing it from our peers.

Nothing destroys your social standing quite like arriving at the cinema carrying a warm orange soft drink that your father bought because it was cheaper.

We would sneak in, clutching our contraband Fanta, and wait desperately for the lights to go out before revealing it.

Meanwhile, Dad sat there entirely untroubled by embarrassment, secure in the knowledge that while other families were wasting money on cold drinks, he was building character.

And saving 12 cents.

1969

Swimming results

Bluetts galore

This is a Papua New Guinea Post-Courier report of the Rotary-sponsored Goroka Junior Swimming Carnival, published 15 January 1970 (Page 27).

GIRLS

Freestyle

* U13 (1 lap): D. Bluett
* Open (2 laps): H. Sharp

Breaststroke

* U13 (1 lap): D. Bluett
* Open (2 laps): H. Sharp

Backstroke

* U13 (1 lap): Meredith Miles
* U14 (1 lap): D. Bluett
* Open (2 laps): H. Sharp

Children’s Race Across the Pool

* Sharon Bluett

Mixed Open Freestyle (6 laps)

1. G. Long – 2:47.0
2. B. Brands
3. P. Atkins

Diving (Girls)

1. J. McGarry
2. M. Miles
3. P. Tucker

———

BOYS

Freestyle

* U13 (1 lap): P. Atkins
* U14 (1 lap): Norton
* U15 (2 laps): M. Dwyer

* U16: G. Long
* Open: M. Spriggs

Breaststroke

* U13 (1 lap): P. Atkins
* U14: P. Atkins
* U15 (2 laps): M. Dwyer
* U16: G. Long
* Open: M. Spriggs

Backstroke

* U13 (1 lap): P. Atkins
* U14: P. Atkins
* U15 (2 laps): M. Dwyer
* U16: G. Long
* Open: G. Long

Butterfly

* U16 (1 lap): D. Greathead

Standing Straight Dive

* Boys winner: D. Choice

Diving (Boys)

1. M. Spriggs
2. G. Long
3. P. Atkins

———

Goroka Team for the Territory Titles

Selected:

* D. Bluett
* M. Miles
* R. Miles
* A. Guest
* P. O’Connell
* A. Nord
* S. Hanson
* J. Norton
* J. Long
* W. Hanson

* P. Atkins
* M. Spriggs

———

Notable Bluett Results

D. Bluett won:

* Girls U13 Freestyle
* Girls U13 Breaststroke
* Girls U14 Backstroke

Sharon Bluett won:
I taught her to swim by throwing her in the deep end she could swim but just scared of the deep but not after that she was shocked but in her eyes I could do no wrong

* Children’s race across the pool

And D. Bluett was selected for the Goroka team for the Territory titles.

A remarkable family result from Goroka in 1970.

1969

Groceries

Groceries and more groceries

Dad had a fascination with groceries that bordered on performance art. It must have been a Depression-era thing. To him, a pantry wasn't a pantry unless it contained enough supplies to survive a siege, a flood, and possibly the Second Coming.

He was blessed with a very high IQ and a brain that operated several stations ahead of everyone else. Nobody had waved a spectrometer over him in those days, and the term Asperger's wasn't exactly in common use, but over time Mum slowly concluded that this charismatic, brilliant and gloriously quirky man was probably somewhere on the spectrum. These days we'd say it quite casually. Back then we just said, "That's Dad."

Living in Goroka wasn't going to stop him sourcing groceries from Lae, 300 kilometres away over the Highlands Highway. Dad would dispatch his one-tonne ute to buy trade store goods from Seeto Kui as though he was running a supermarket chain rather than feeding a family. Surely it would have been cheaper to truck the goods in with the regular freight, but where was the adventure in that?

Naturally, when something went wrong, I became the recovery department.

On one memorable trip the Land Cruiser suffered brake failure on the descent to the Leron River. Faced with the prospect of becoming airborne, the driver employed the traditional Highlands emergency braking system by steering the left front wheel into the barat on the side of the road to scrub off speed.

It worked brilliantly.

Perhaps a little too brilliantly.

The wheel departed the vehicle entirely and headed off to pursue its own career opportunities.

Dad's solution was simple.

"Send Paul."

I was about fourteen years old. There is probably a law against this sort of thing now. There may even have been one then.

Dad somehow persuaded the airline to take me despite the flight being full. Airline clerks were mostly expats in those days and still possessed dangerous levels of common sense and flexibility.

I flew to Lae alone, checked into the CWA hostel — another thing that would trigger several alarms in 2026 — and headed straight for Ela Motors.

I planted myself outside the workshop manager’s office and simply waited.

And waited.

Eventually he realised that I was not leaving voluntarily and, in an act of mercy or surrender, removed the required part from a brand-new vehicle sitting in the showroom.

Problem solved.

The Land Cruiser was repaired, the groceries were saved, civilisation continued, and Dad’s strategic grocery reserves remained intact.

Mission accomplished.

Looking back, it was less a supply chain and more an expeditionary force with cartons of canned meat.

1969

NSA of png

Mums account of the early years of the NSA

Early years of the National Assembly

Chapter Four

“In the Rose Garden of changeless splendour, a Flower hath began to bloom, compared to which every other flower is but a thorn, and before the brightness of Whose glory the very essence of beauty must pale and wither. Arise, therefore, and, with the whole enthusiasm of your hearts, with all the eagerness of your souls, the full fervour of your will, and the concentrated efforts of your entire being, strive to attain the paradise of His presence, and endeavour to inhale the fragrance of the incorruptible Flower, to breathe the sweet savours of holiness, and to obtain a portion of this perfume of celestial glory.”

Baha’u’llah – Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah. Pp.320-321

The first meeting of the newly elected National Assembly of the Baha’is of Papua New Guinea after the National Convention was held in Klinki Lodge, Lae, a hostel style accommodation building for travellers. Eight of us crowded into a small bedroom and our first item on the agenda was to elect office bearers. One elected member Gus Dau was absent so the office bearers elected were declared temporary and that status was not changed during the first year. Gus Dau originated from the Kombe islands an isolated community with limited means of communication, where contact was a person to person process and travelling from the islands was only possible on small vessels or canoes.
The feeling of being a temporary Secretary suited my mood, I felt inadequate in the role I had to fill and the goals we were expected to accomplish seemed almost impossible. Fortunately, as Baha’is we have the writings to inspire us to accomplish difficult tasks within a period and the impossible just takes a bit longer. Armed with the words of Baha’u’llah; his lyrical images can carry a believer into the ‘Garden of Changeless Splendour’. As written in the above quote we ‘ask of our hearts, with all the eagerness of our souls and the ’concentrated efforts of our entire being’ that we be enabled to carry out the tasks asked of us.
The National Assembly decided not to elect officers at the first meeting of the Assembly held in the Huon Gulf Council Chambers, because two elected members, Noel, and myself, were absent in England on study leave. Reports of the event indicated it was preferable to wait until a full meeting could be organised.
I heard the first convention was honoured by the presence of Hand of the Cause Collis Featherstone, Counsellor Thelma Rewards, a representative from the National Assembly of Australia, Stanley Bolton, and Auxiliary Board Member Violet Hoehnke. The emotions endangered by that first Convention must have resembled the feelings aroused by the birth of a new baby, joyful but with a degree of apprehension at

facing an unknown future. It was impossible to predict how this group of ordinary people, like new parents, would be able to carry out the enormous task given to them by the Universal House of Justice.
All those visitors have now passed into the Abba Kingdom so we can't ask them what their impressions were or what transpired at that first Convention but I do remember Vi telling me she was involved in cooking for the delegates and was completely exhausted after it was all over. At the time, she was the only Baha'i living in Lae and had no choice in the matter, it had to be done and that was it. Baha'is often find ourselves in that position, without trained clergy, without any experience we do what has be done and can only pray for assistance from God. Vi had been Matron of the Lae hospital before she retired and she was the best person available to take charge of events.
The new Assembly consisted of six pioneers and three local believers who represented the areas in the country which experienced the most growth, Michael Homerang from New Ireland, John Francis from Siane in the Eastern Highlands, and Gus Dau from Kombe in West New Britain. When Baha'i elections are held it often seems as though a divine presence chooses the best people available at the time despite the inexperience of the voters or the embryonic nature of the institutions designated as Spiritual Assemblies and destined in the unknown future to develop into Local and National Houses of Justice.

The first National Assembly in Lae 1969

Front Row L. to R. John Francis, Michael Homerang, Margaret Bluett, Sue Podger, David Podger. Back Row: Frank Wyss, Noel Bluett, Rodney Hancock.

No member of the Assembly resided in Lae, the place designated by the House of Justice to be the seat of the National Assembly, nevertheless we were given the task of building or purchasing a National Centre in that town. The other responsibilities I remember were to acquire a Temple Site, extend the teaching into new areas, carry out several translations of the writings into local languages and to build three Teaching Institutes in different provinces. Institutes were regarded as locations – in those days, rather than a program or process.
When Noel and I returned to Papua New Guinea from overseas I had the task of organising a national office, which needed a typewriter, a filing cabinet, and a way to reproduce printed material. I found a second-hand Gestetner. The Gestetner, which has been rendered redundant by new technology, was a stencil method duplicator which used a thin sheet of paper coated with wax. You typed on the waxed sheet bi-passing the typewriter ribbon, attached the stencil to the machine and ink was forced through the typed letters by a roller, a rather primitive process in the light of today's technology.
I spent many frustrating hours typing and printing the minutes in two languages, English and Melanesian Pidgin but it was good practice for my Pidgin. I used a book from the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Kainantu to correct my limited abilities in the language. The Baha'i writings are written in such complex language that test the ingenuity of a translator to convey the original depth of the words into Pidgin. For example, 'unfurl the standard' reads 'hangimupim dispela plag' or hang up the

flag which doesn't convey to me the challenge of the concept. When Geoff Heard translated the book 'The New Garden', he felt the title would be interpreted literally and called the book 'Nupela Laif'. English has more abstract words than Pidgin and many words with several meanings and literary allusions, and Persian or Farsi uses even more elaborate imagery as well as references to ancient stories. Pidgin however is direct and better than English with a funny story. Maybe that is because Papua New Guinea people have a good sense of humour, always prepared to laugh at jokes and at themselves.

Delegates to second Convention 1970 from New Ireland
Tamun Kosap, unknown, Watlau Eramus and Lundeng Capenias

My husband helped me write the Minutes by correcting my mistakes and making me re-write them until they looked reasonably professional. He was a qualified Company Secretary and I think he would have been happy to have been elected Secretary of the Assembly, but most people usually think of Secretaries as being female. From him I learned there are minutes of narration and minutes of decision and the National Assembly minutes became a mixture of both because some of the discussions and reasons which led to a decision needed to be recorded for future reference. However, as Noel, has passed away I should record the fact he was an excellent Chairman and supported me as Secretary, encouraging me to spend most of my time on Assembly work.
The few meetings held in 1969 in Klinki Lodge in Lae were rather cramped and awkward because the members stayed in the Lodge and one of the bedrooms was used for the meetings. Our second big problem was shortage of funds. Noel opened a bank account in Lae in the name of the Assembly with a small amount of money; I don't remember how much it was but remember laughing about it at the time. We didn't have an income stream and were relying on the House of Justice for funding which was not adequate for the purchase of a property in Lae. Even a small house was expensive and the acquisition of a large enough piece of land for a future Temple seemed out of reach. The funds we received from the House of Justice only covered travel expenses of the local members while all the pioneers covered their own expenses. We hired a post office box in Lae to receive the mail and Vi Hoehnke collected it and sent it on to me.

First woman from the Highlands to be a Delegate to a National Convention – Silipo Shokepa from Arufa 1973 -

In 1970 the Podgers bought a large property in Sogeri, with a big rambling old plantation type house and a couple of sheds with enough space to accommodate Assembly members. It was decided then to alternate the meetings between Sogeri and Goroka. In Goroka the meetings were held in the Coffee Board Office and the members stayed in a round house of bamboo sails and grass roof in our garden built for us by the believers in Arufa.

The Podger home in Sogeri was in a magnificent location with a view over the Sogeri River; surrounded with tall trees, extensive gardens, an orchid garden at the entrance, more inspiring than Klinki Lodge. The National Convention was held in

the Huon Gulf Council building for a few years because most the believers lived in New Guinea, in the Highlands and coastal regions and it was cheaper for them to travel to Lae. When the Papuan communities grew larger due to expansion in Mountain Brown, Afore, the Gulf and other places near to Moresby it was decided to hold the National Convention in the Podger's home in Sogeri. One Convention we chartered a DC3 to fly the New Guinea delegates to Moresby, a plan more economical than buying individual tickets. It was great fun travelling on a plane carrying only Baha'is.

While making inquiries about land we discovered in the post war years, prior to Independence, an application for land for a Mission Lease for the benefit of Papua New Guinea people, if granted, would be free of charge. With this knowledge, the National Assembly applied to the Lands Department for a block of land for a future Temple Site. The Lands Department suggested we apply for a ten-acre block on the side of a mountain in the Atzera Range which had been released from native title to the Administration and was suitable for a Mission Lease. The block was behind the Swiss Mission with access from the main road out of Lae towards Nadzab along the Markham Valley about ten miles from town. We thought It would be a wonderful site for a Temple as it overlooked the valley with a magnificent view of the Markham River and we lodged an application. However, the Department changed its mind in favour of another application for a weapons storage facility, rather ironic. Another reason given for the withdrawal of the offer was a surveyor had informed the Lands Department the Land was unstable. We didn't know then that the National Centre would eventually be moved to Moresby but we must have been divinely protected because that site later suffered a severe landslide in 1988, just as the original survey predicted. The landslide destroyed three villages and seventy-three people were buried alive.

The National Assembly decided to build one of the Institutes at the back of the Sogeri property large enough for accommodation for the delegates to Convention. John Mills and his family arrived in Port Moresby from the Solomons in 1968, and he had experience in the building trade and supervised the erection of a large building with some facilities such as toilets and showers. It was later moved to Hohola to be used on the property purchased for the Port Moresby community. All the National Assembly meetings in those days were primarily focussed on teaching because the believers were increasing in numbers as the Faith spread into new areas. The growth gave us new problems, such as supplying travel teachers with resources to deepen the friends in remote areas. The fact the teaching was so successful in so many locations was a reason to rejoice but for those who had the responsibility of administering them it was often rather overwhelming. We were also concerned about how to establish a National Office in Lae.

I did mention the story in 'Birds into Paradise' but it was a brilliant idea. At that time, it didn't occur to us to ask for help from overseas. The House of Justice was providing sufficient funds for travel expenses but not enough to buy properties. Noel maintained an interest in the Stock Exchange and when he read there was to be a mine in Bougainville and residents were being offered the opportunity to buy the original shares at a special price before they went public, he believed the shares

would increase in value once they were released on the open market. He persuaded the pioneer members of the Assembly to purchase shares in their own names, naturally the National Assembly could not take that responsibility even if we had available funds. Other pioneers also put up the money for shares even financing local members to purchase some. Noel was correct and the value of the shares soared when they were placed on International markets and we made more than twelve thousand pounds, enough to purchase and furnish a small house in Lae.

National Assembly 1971 -Lae
Geoff Heard, Lopena Vera, Margaret Bluett with youngest daughter Anna Lisa, Noel Bluett,
Elti Kunak, John Francis, Sue Podger, John Gapo, David Podger

The National Assembly elected in 1971 experienced a few changes in membership. Frank Wyss left the country for Canberra, Rodney Hancock was appointed as an Auxiliary Board Member, Lopena Vera and Geoff Heard replaced them and Elti Kunak from Madina replaced Homerang, John Gapo replaced Gus Dau while John Francis remained a member.
The meetings that year were lively and interesting because Geoff Heard was a fluent pidgin speaker, who lived in the country for several years, in Rabaul and in Kieta in Bougainville. His Pidgin was so good he could tell jokes using colloquialisms which all the members understood and the meetings, when he was present, were genuine entertainment. Geoff and Leila were moved to Bougainville at the beginning of the establishment of the mine and told us stories about the building of the road to Panguna the mine site, describing the vast quantities of equipment and building supplies that flowed into the country through Kieta. The road was lined for miles with containers containing sensitive supplies, there were no storage warehouses at the early stages of construction. It was a road and a mine constructed in mountainous rainforest with all the problems that terrain gave the builders.
Geoff’s fluency in Pidgin and his local humour made the NSA meetings so entertaining I decided to tape them not to miss any of his jokes or any of the details of the often-lively consultation. Consequently, it would take me a week to write the minutes because I kept laughing at the fun we all had being together. I did wipe the tapes for security reasons when the Minutes were completed. The teaching work was flourishing – an exciting time to be involved in the progress of the Faith and to record the miraculous rate of development.
During 1970 Leila and Geoff and their adopted son moved to Goroka where Geoff managed the radio station. Their son was a young Tolai boy, Aminio Bale, who grew up to be an active Baha’i and served on the National Assembly for several years. I was overjoyed when the Heards lived in the same town because we had felt rather lonely and isolated as the only pioneers. Baha’is, in the early days can resemble an extended family, particularly in a location such as PNG. The Heards were good company and helped with deepening new believers, on teaching trips into the Siane and Asaro. We endured a few adventurous journeys together created by heavy rain and slippery unstable roads prone to landslides.
That year Geoff completed his translation of the book ‘The New Garden’ and I typed

it on stencils and we printed the first copies of the book in our living room using the Assembly's Gestetner. We borrowed a guillotine from the Coffee Board to cut the pages and compile the book and while slicing paper Geoff cut off the top of one his fingers. He went pale with shock as I grabbed a towel and picked up the piece of his finger, wrapped his hand tightly and took to him straight to hospital where the doctor stitched the detached piece of finger back on. The wound healed well but the finger remained a bit crooked. We didn't finish the printing that night and to cheer him up I told him about the quote which says if you shed one drop of blood in the service of Baha'u'llah you are considered a martyr (that is a free translation but it seemed appropriate at the time.)
To complete the story of the book a year or two later we sent the printed material to the Indian Baha'i Publishing Trust in Delhi to have it printed into a hard cover book which was to be the first Baha'i material published in PNG in Pidgin. The Trust printed the book, we ordered a thousand copies, and for a long time we didn't hear about the progress of the printing. We asked Hand of the Cause Muhajir, who visited New Guinea several times during those years, to trace it for us because his wife was managing the Trust. He discovered the books had been printed, packed and despatched to Conakri, the capital of Guinea in Africa. The committee responsible for the mailing had never heard of Papua New Guinea and just presumed we were in Africa. Another set was printed at no cost to us and duly despatched. I think they arrived in Lae in 1973 and we stored them under the Baha'i Centre in Swallow Rd. Luckily one object that rascals don't steal is books and they were not interfered with even though they were not housed in a locked area. The books were all used up within a couple of years, not sure if a reprint was ever done, but I do know the believers in New Ireland, the oldest community in New Guinea, were absolutely delighted to receive a Baha'i book they could read.

In December 1970, Hand of the Cause from Africa, Enoch Olinga, visited Papua New Guinea. In Moresby and Goroka meetings were arranged so many as possible of the new believers could meet him. In Goroka he was happy to find a place that reminded him of his home villages in Uganda and the Cameroons. We organised one meeting for him in a school hall in town and three hundred friends attended. Noel and Geoff collected them in our truck and took them all home again, journeys that took nearly all night.
Olinga was visually exciting for the people because he was black and shiny with a lovely smile and local people instantly connected with him. Our son Michael took him to the market and as they walked around the outdoor stalls he attracted a crowd that followed him around. I think he may have been one of the first visitors from Africa they had ever seen. We took him to the village of Arufa where he sat down with the friends on the grass and talked to them. He was overcome with emotion at the way the people lived; he empathised with the difficulties the people were experiencing through the great changes currently affecting their lives. He told me the people reminded him of the people of Mozambique in Africa, who lived in one of the three locations on the planet never exposed to a revealed religion. They were still living materially and spiritually in a way the rest of the world had long forgotten.

The Hand of the Cause left PNG to attend a Baha'i Conference in Singapore and Noel was so enamoured of this wonderful man he decided to go to Singapore specially to see him again. Our eldest daughter Dianne begged to go with her father and he agreed. Noel was very uplifted during the first meeting of the Conference because when Olinga arrived in the room and walked to the stage he recognised Noel and came down to where he was sitting to give him a big hug and shake Dianne's hand. Noel told me he was very pleased the Hand of the Cause had recognised him amongst the large audience.

Hand of the Cause Enoch Olinga with the friends in Arufa 1970

Hand of the Cause Enoch Olinga saying goodbye to pioneers Michael Bluett, Leila Heard and Margaret Bluett – Goroka Airport 1970

We learnt later from Husayn and Isobel Sabri, pioneers in Uganda, before Olinga departed on his travel teaching trip; he returned home and for three months studied the writings, meditated, and prayed he would be guided to deliver effective talks in the foreign countries he was about to visit. If I remember correctly he had been an inspector of schools in various places in Africa and when young - a teacher, consequently his talks were truly inspiring and his loving presence left an indelible memory amongst those privileged to see him and to hear him.

Institute in Goroka – three different tribal groups were represented Bena, Asaro and Goroka

In 1970 our next door neighbour Geoff De Ghonge became a believer. He helped with the holding of the above Institute which was held in our garden. The tent belonged to the Coffee Board so we had sleeping accommodation in the round house and classes in the tent and I did the cooking in our kitchen.
Another hand of the Cause John Robarts from Canada, visited PNG and spent time with us in Goroka. We held an Institute style meeting in our garden for him with some of the educated youth from surrounding villages. Another pioneer living in Goroka at the time, a Persian nurse, Tahirih Vatanparast, attended the Institute and helped John with his talks. John was quite elderly and ill and after a day of talking he was very tired. As night fell Noel was about to drive him home when fifty people from Arufa arrived. They walked from the village, about eight miles, in the dark and pouring rain to meet The Hand of the Cause. John was really shocked, how was he going to cope with these people who could not speak English, were poorly clothed, wet, hungry, and very cold. He asked me 'What are you going to give them to eat?' He realised all the sandwiches and snacks I made for the classes during the day was gone. I told him, we were used to this sort of thing for village people. We had a store room full of bags of rice, tinned fish and plenty of vegetables, our house cook had no problem cooking lots of food in our kitchen, in big pots on our large stove and brewing hot cups of tea to warm them. Noel explained to John he didn't need to speak again we would tell the people what was said during the day. By this time, Noel was fluent in pidgin and could tell stories in a local style. Our living room was large enough for them to sit on the floor and they were happy to be out of the cold

rain adequately fed and listen to stories. John made an interesting comment that evening he found the Arufa people more spiritual than the young educated men he talked to.

Hand of the Cause John Robarts meeting with the friends in Goroka including Noel and daughter Sharon with Tahirih Vatanparast from Iran - 1972

During 1972 Goroka acquired two new pioneers, Dan, and Fay Himes from America. Dan was a teacher at the Goroka Teachers College and the family were wonderful company. I was very pleased after the Heards left for Moresby we had some friends to replace them.
The National Assembly was asked to build or acquire three Institute buildings but short on funds for these projects the Assembly relied on donations from pioneers and labour provided by local believers. The first one in Sogeri, was mentioned earlier, and the second one was built in Madina with materials and labour provided by the friends in New Ireland. It is a solid brick building with a cement floor and galvanised iron roof. By 1972 we still hadn't built one in the Highlands and the best place to do that had to be in or close to town because the roads to villages were often impassable in the wet season but we only had a budget of a thousand dollars, insufficient to erect a building to meet town requirements. We asked the believers in Arufa village if there was any land available in the village where we could erect a permanent structure. After much discussion, they decided on an area of land on the side of a steep hill at the entrance to the village. To secure this plot of land legally we had to apply to the Lands Department to release what was then known as native title and register it in the name of the National Assembly. This was completed and I think possibly the title has never been changed. It would need to be investigated in the future and would need the support of the village people. It might be difficult to establish ownership because the Lands Department has been rather inefficient since Independence. I heard in the last few years the Lutheran Church is holding services in the building on Sundays but I don't know if they changed the title.
Consultation on building in the village made it clear we couldn't afford to have plans drawn up by a professional draftsman, then the idea of building a round house came up. No plan necessary for that you just put a stick in the middle, tie a piece of rope the size of the radius you require to the stick and draw a circle. I hired a local carpenter and someone to pour the cement and we created a floor with a large pole in the middle strong enough to support a roof. The walls of woven bamboo, the wooden windows with shutters, a door and benches for seating were made by the village people. The roof was made from sections of green fibre glass and when the walls were completed the roof was added. From the Bena road, the building was visible as the sun shone brightly on the fibre glass and I was very proud of it. We appointed a live-in caretaker, a young man from Asaro named Ambele Kunure and he planted a garden around the house.

In 1972 the National Assembly received a letter from the Universal House of Justice reminding us they had designated Lae as the National Centre and wondered when we were planning to follow their instructions. I said to my husband,
'Well that settles it I am moving to Lae. We must ask the tenants to move out of the

house in Swallow Road so we can occupy it as a National Office and Centre.’
He agreed so I packed up the NSA equipment, the typewriter, the filing cabinet and the Gestetner into our second car, a small Volkswagen. I put my baby girl in her car seat with my other daughter Sharon, then eleven years of age, and drove us to the coast, about two hundred miles. Luckily our other four children had already left town and were boarding in schools in Sydney. Noel missed his family and worked on a plan to relocate himself from Goroka to Lae which included finding someone to replace him in Goroka. He wanted, naturally, a Baha’i and in Washington found Jim Sturdivant, an African American believer, and his young wife from Iran, who both wanted to pioneer.
When Noel moved to Lae to live with his family, Jim ran the Goroka Office of New Guinea Coffee Brokers and the Sturdivants lived in our large house and Jim found it difficult to reconcile himself living in top class accommodation, driving a large four-wheel vehicle while the friends lived with what he regarded as extreme poverty. However, when he made friends with a Catholic Father also an African American he learnt to accept the circumstances he couldn’t change. The young couple adapted well to their new circumstances and lived in Goroke for a couple of years helping with Institutes in Arufa and holding Feasts and other meetings in their house. Jim served on the National Assembly for a year. I remember the day he walked into the Convention where the delegates were all sitting and a wave of excitement swept through the room. They identified with an African American pioneer who they recognised as a spiritual man.

Institute Building in Arufa – James Sturdivant and Lopena Vera conducting a class in 1973

The Coffee company were not happy with Noel living in Lae and eventually terminated his employment, unfortunately they also terminated Jim and the town no longer had a resident pioneer. Sadly, after the Sturdivants left the friends in Arufa gradually became inactive due to pressures villagers experience when they live at the edge of a town and become distracted by other activities.

1971

Winsome, Four Suitcases and a Collapsed Garage

A teenage missionary boy's adventures in the Highlands in 1971.

Welcoming Winsome

The good thing about being a missionary boy is that you got to look after the visiting missionary girls. We called them travel teachers. This particular one was named Winsome. She wore a mini-skirt, had an infectious laugh, and was 23 years old. I was 17 and considered myself devastatingly charming. Decorum, however, was maintained at all times. Sadly.

For one trip into the Siane area of Chimbu she arrived wearing a crocheted green pantsuit. We are talking seriously rough country here. The towering Elimbari limestone massif loomed over everything, 9,000 feet of menace and mystery. Winsome also arrived with four pieces of matching green Samsonite luggage—or something similar. Missionary boys don't pay much attention to brands. We mainly notice how much there is to carry.

Fortunately, my brother and sister came too, providing additional packhorse capacity.

The PMV took us as far as Lende. After that it was boots on the ground, over the Elimbari crest and into the Siane Valley. If you know, you know. Bridges consisted of four logs across a raging creek, sometimes nailed down, sometimes not. Occasionally the maintenance schedule involved replacing the bridge while standing on it.

Each of us carried a rucksack and one of Winsome's green suitcases. We were allowed to complain. It was practically compulsory.

After what felt like several days but was probably an hour, we reached Rumala via Negemo. Our host asked if we wanted tea—or at least that's what I thought he said. Visions of hot tea danced before our eyes as Winsome and her colour-coordinated luggage settled in.

The host carefully washed his best bone china cups. There was much ceremony and preparation. Finally he presented us with elegant cups containing hot water, milk and sugar.

No tea.

Just the supporting cast.

We drank it anyway and complimented him on its subtle flavour.

The next stop was Kimo, off the Nambiufa Ring Road. There we met Nurse Winsome Kinraid. Our contact family had a new baby and Winsome was planning to teach hygiene and infant care. Water was boiled, the bottle sterilised and everything was done by the book. Winsome was glowing with satisfaction.

Then the father took a dirty towel, wiped the rubber teat thoroughly, and handed it to the baby.

I swear I could hear Winsome's lesson notes quietly bursting into flames.

Another adventure for winsome was the Hagen Show. This time I took Dad's Toyota Stout. To cover fuel costs, we planned to carry paying passengers.

As the truck filled, one student tried to travel for free.

I started the engine.

Suddenly he found money.

Amazing what modern transport can achieve.

Over the Daulo Pass the truck developed mechanical issues. By the time we reached Hagen, we had spent more on mechanics than we collected in fares. Financially, it was less a transport operation and more a charitable donation to the motor trade.

The show itself was magnificent. Not 80,000 dancers like 1965 but impressive nonetheless.

Worrying about my truck I couldn't enjoy the shows

The truck continued misbehaving all the way home until we reached the top of Daulo Pass. Then, as if by divine intervention, it ran perfectly.

My spirits lifted. Through Asaro we flew and eventually rolled triumphantly into Garden Street, horn blaring.

Unfortunately every parking space was occupied.

New Guinea Coffee Brokers were holding a board meeting.

No problem, I thought.

I swung into the old garage with the peaked roof.

What I had forgotten was that the canopy on the Toyota Stout was higher than the garage entrance.

There followed a brief engineering demonstration.

The garage lost.

The truck won.

The garage roof collapsed onto our Volkswagen Beetle.

The board meeting came to an abrupt conclusion.

People appeared from every direction.

I considered hiding under a rock but most of Goroka’s rocks were already occupied by laughing relatives.

To the Beetle’s credit, it only suffered a small crease in the roof.

To my credit, I climbed inside and pushed the dent out with my feet.

Problem solved.

Well, mechanically solved.

My reputation took a little longer.

The moral of the story is that missionary work builds character, stamina, cultural understanding, and occasionally teaches advanced techniques in improvised panel beating.

Photos the bag carriers and the mini skirt and a rare photo of all 6 siblings

1971

A Cyclone, Ten Dollars and a Ticket Home

My teenage hitchhiking adventure from Sydney to PNG, without telling my parents.

By fifth year boarding — well, sixth really if you counted one year in India in primary school, and honestly who even does that — I had developed what my parents liked to call “independence” and what most normal people would probably call “mildly concerning behaviour in a teenager”.
I decided I would make my own way home to PNG for the holidays.
Again: who even does that?
First step was financing the expedition. I got a job at Joseph’s in the Wentworth Hotel in Sydney. Magnificent pay package:
* $40 a week wages
* $25 board and all
* leaving me with roughly enough disposable income to purchase half a sandwich and a bus ticket to Parramatta.
After a few weeks I was rich enough to launch my expedition north.
I got a lift overnight to Brisbane with some of the owner’s nephews, then pointed myself toward Cairns with:
* a 20kg backpack,
* a meth burner,
* sleeping bag,
* tape recorder,
* and the survival instincts of a Labrador puppy.
I made it to Rockhampton okay, only to discover Cyclone Althea had flattened Townsville and flooded the river outside Rocky. Important detail: I had not been following the news. Boarding school boys in those days were basically mushrooms — kept in the dark and fed badly.
Back to Rocky.
It was Christmas long weekend. Banks shut. I had about ten bucks left. And it was raining
People’s Palace accommodation was $2 a night, luxury only slightly below Pentridge. I cooked rice and tinned fish on the floor of my room with my little burner. The instant coffee tasted faintly of rice from the billy. PNG training was already paying dividends.
After paying six dollars for three nights’ accommodation, my financial strategy became:
1. hope the river goes down,
2. don’t starve,
3. avoid calculating anything.

Eventually the river dropped and despite the banks still being shut, I set off again because optimism is free.
By nightfall I was somewhere near Mackay and the lifts dried up. A kind householder let me sleep on the verandah. Unfortunately:
* the mosquitoes forced me inside my overheated sleeping bag,
* and the giant dog guarded the tap like it was Fort Knox.
At about 2am I thought, “Stuff this,” and wandered back out to the highway to try my luck.
My next brilliant idea was falling asleep on the edge of the tarmac.
I woke suddenly as a bus thundered past with its wheels almost on the shoulder, the blast physically rolling me over. Through the diesel fumes and shock I looked up to see about sixteen rear lights disappearing into the darkness — cyclone relief convoys heading north.
At that moment I briefly considered that perhaps my parents’ independence program had gone slightly too far.
Jack of that, I walked until daylight where an Aboriginal bloke picked me up for a town or two. Then came the miracle lift all the way to Cairns.
We stopped in Townsville for lunch. Civilization! Banking! Money!
I withdrew cash and ordered a T-bone steak at a pub. The thing hung over the plate like a small canoe. The emotional relief was overwhelming. To this day I still rate that steak among the greatest moments of my life.
I reached Cairns by nightfall in the rain. Couldn’t sleep outside. Budget blown. Endurance defeated.
So I did what every hardened adventurer eventually does:I bought a plane ticket.
Fifty bucks for a one-way student fare home, pom , then the ubiquitous DC3 to Goroka.
I got to Garden Street.
Nobody home.
Perfect.
So I walked back into Steamies Goroka — did we even call it that then? — and while I was standing there my mother walked into the shop.
She saw me.
Then she put her hand over her mouth, partly in shock and partly, I suspect, to stop the Goroka flies getting in.
Even now the thought of that moment sends shivers down my spine.
My parents taught me independence.
Possibly because they had no reliable way of stopping me.

1971

Export coffee

Collins and Leahy

Dad did six years with the Coffee Marketing Board and in those days we lived in town in the Farmers and Settlers building, conveniently located next to his office. His commute involved roughly twenty paces and one set of stairs. Peak efficiency.

Eventually we moved to West Goroka, in the same street as the school, at the end of a long avenue lined with pine trees. Life was positively cheesy in those days.

Then Dad had one of his bright ideas.

He approached all the big coffee names — the Collinses, the Leahys and the other plantation families — and proposed an export company. Danny Leahy held over 50%, Dad had 10%, and the remaining 40% was shared among the other families.

Success followed quickly.

We moved back into town, roasted our own coffee and suddenly life became cottage cheese. We even had our own little bungalow out the back for us kids, complete with a ping-pong table. By Goroka standards we were practically landed gentry.

Dad recruited one of our Bahá'í friends, an African-American manager named Jim. In the Highlands in the early 1970s that probably ruffled a few feathers, but to everyone's credit nobody said much about it.

Then Dad made a mistake.

Actually, two mistakes.

The first was discovering coffee futures, put options, call options and whatever the other ones are called. Financial instruments designed, as far as I can tell, to transfer money from optimistic people to confident people.

Dad tried explaining them to Jim.

He tried explaining them to me.

Jim and I exchanged the same look.

"Run that past me again?"

The trouble with futures trading is that the futures eventually become the present and demand answers.

Unfortunately Dad then departed for Israel as a PNG delegate to the 1973 Bahá'í elections. In those days, when you went to Israel, people generally respected the concept of a spiritual retreat.

There was no mobile phone.

No email.

No WhatsApp.

No “just checking in”.

No forwarding calls.

The market, however, remained stubbornly open for business.

Prices moved.

Deadlines approached.

Options expired.

Apparently when prices go up you have to do one thing, and when they go down you have to do an entirely different thing. Jim understood this only marginally better than I did.

I still feel sorry for Jim.

He has sadly passed away now, but I remain in touch with his lovely wife. Between the three of us, I don’t think any of us ever fully understood coffee futures.

Dad eventually returned from Israel and made his second mistake.

He covered for his man.

In doing so, he effectively covered for himself as well.

The board eventually discovered what had happened and showed him the door.

At the time it felt like a disaster.

As it turned out, it was merely the universe clearing its throat before introducing the next chapter.

And that chapter turned out rather well.

1971

Butch Cassidy

Golf club goroka

Back in those days, nights at the Goroka Golf Club were simple but unforgettable. After the Highlands mist rolled in and the last golfers drifted away, the clubhouse came alive. Someone had brought in a projector, and for reasons only known to fate, the film of choice was Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

The first night, we sat there wide-eyed as Paul Newman’s Butch charmed everyone and Robert Redford’s Sundance held that cool, quiet edge. The second night, they rolled the projector again. And then again. Before long, it wasn’t just a movie—it was part of life at the club.

The beam of light from that old projector cut through the smoky clubhouse, throwing Newman and Redford onto the wall in larger-than-life detail. We’d pull up chairs, crack open SP beers, and laugh, cheer, or groan our way through scenes we already knew by heart. The “Raindrops Keep Fallin’ on My Head” moment would always bring out a few loud, tuneless voices trying to sing along.

By the end, we’d watched it thirteen times straight. Not one of us complained. Because by then it wasn’t about Butch or Sundance—it was about us. The camaraderie, the ritual, the sense that we were part of something special, even if it was just a bunch of mates in Goroka, night after night, watching the same film on loop.

Now, with Redford gone, that memory feels even sharper. Newman left us years ago, and now Sundance has ridden off too. But in my mind, they’ll always be there—caught in that projector’s glow at the Goroka Golf Club, forever charging into the unknown, with all of us cheering them on.
Note I was the only tee totaler

1971

Lae hq for Baha’is

Details of the national centre

The National Centre in Lae

Chapter Five

The Baha’i Centre, purchased in 1971, was a small house in a delightful setting situated in Swallow Road, Lae. The property was backed by a rain forest which led to the slopes of Mount Luna men and was within walking distance of the Bumbu River and the ocean.
The suburb known as Chinatown dated from the nineteen twenties when the first Chinese arrived as tradesmen. They were contracted to work for the Government in Salamaua, the original town, and helped build the airport. Some of them saw business opportunities in the area and moved to Lae after the First World War. Then after the two world wars most of the Chinese settlers, who established the trading centre beside the Bumbu Bridge, originated from Rabaul. They were mainly Protestants who suffered discriminated from the Chinese Catholic community and they also established businesses in the new town.
The original missionaries in Lae, were German Lutherans consequently most of the people who lived around Lae, in villages close to town, particularly Butibam occupied by the Ahi people, became Protestants. These settlers acquired much of the available land where they erected small churches, established schools, businesses, and plantations. Most Chinese settlers attended their services, their schools and built trade stores, a Club and socialised with each other. They were not welcome in the expatriate social world that lived and worked in the new town. Not allowed to obtain land in town on long term leases they eventually prospered due to their values of hard work and involving family in their businesses.

For three years from 1972 the National Assembly met in the new Centre in Swallow Road, and character of the location had some effect on Baha’i activities at the time. The multi-cultural nature of the suburb meant it was a friendly environment for local people who began visiting the house after we moved in. These surroundings particularly impacted on the social life of my children who made long term friends with what is known as the Mixed-Race community, who by then were the largest group living around the Baha’i Centre.

Before I moved to Lae to establish the Secretariat I believed we needed a community to support the Centre and made a personal goal to have an LSA by the following Ridvan - 1973. The people most likely to respond to the Message of Baha’u’llah are those who need it, so I was pleased when I found a settlement on the University Road known as the Papuan Compound. There were no Papuans living there then, the residents were all Highlanders, some of them from the Eastern Highlands connected to the village people who became Baha’is. I began visiting

them and inviting them to the Centre and with their participation we could form the first Local Assembly in Lae on 12 November 1972.
I was happy to locate a young Baha'i couple living in a hostel in town, Elizabeth Karava, from Madina, who later served as a member of the National Assembly, and her husband Ila from Kerema. They were elected on the LSA, Ila became Secretary, while I was Chairperson – a new experience for me. Ila was an efficient Secretary, trained in the Public Service to prepare reports and write minutes. It was a joy for all of us to have him in the community and of course I loved Elizabeth from the time she was a young child named Beauty. After she attended High School she changed her name to one she regarded as more suitable for an educated girl, but she was still beautiful. When our family moved to our own house in Boundary Road Elizabeth and Ila became the first caretakers of the Baha'i Centre.

Children's Class at the Centre, Swallow Road, Lae - 1972

We erected a Baha'i sign at the front of the little house and held Children's classes every Sunday. The class grew dramatically when two Baha'i families moved to Lae in 1973. They were Bill and Susan Clarke from Vanuatu with their seven children and the Lau family from Sydney with two children. Their Chinese father was stationed at Igam Barracks a few miles out of town. So, with these mixed-race families in our little community we fitted right into the area.

The second election of the Universal House of Justice occurred in May 1973 and two Papua New Guinea members travelled with the pioneer members to Haifa, Lundeng Capenias from Madina and Lopena Vera, a Papuan married to a Highland lady from Goroka. The pioneers were John Mills, Dan Himes, David, and Sue Podger, Noel and myself. En-route during Easter we stopped in Rome and stood in Vatican square and saw the Pope on his balcony. Lundeng and Lopena could hardly believe they were there.

During the Convention, the first Constitution of the Universal of Justice was presented to the delegates in Haifa - a milestone in the history of the Faith. Another milestone was the production of the Synopsis and Codification of the Aqdas, one of the goals Shoghi Effendi commenced and the Universal House of Justice completed. I was pleasantly surprised to read the laws of the Faith as revealed by Baha'u'llah. They were not as difficult to follow as we had imagined. A few Persians said to me Westerners will be shocked by the Aqdas but I sensed a kindness and understanding of the human condition. For example, when outlining the laws retaining to the obligatory prayers say that one's hands should be washed before prayer and suggests "Should the weather be too cold the use of warm water is recommended".

At the Convention Lopena and Lundeng mingled with people from all over the world, including African delegates, they were now part of a global community. We were all excited and joyful to be on the map of the International Baha'i community. PNG had arrived.

The first PNG NSA members to attend an International Convention in Haifa leaving Moresby

David Podger, Sue Podger, Margaret Bluett, Lundeng Capenias, Noel Bluett, Dan Himes and Lopena Vera

After Israel Noel and I flew to Iran and spent time in Teheran, Shiraz, and Isfahan. We contacted the National Office, forced to operate secretly, no signs outside to indicate what the building contained and no listed telephone numbers. We were delighted when the Secretary told us we were given the privilege to visit the house of Baha'u'llah with an escort in a party that included several National Assembly members from India.

On the drive, we observed the traffic in Teheran was chaotic, no traffic lights, drivers used their car horns to navigate through it and arrived in a neglected area with poorly clad children playing in the streets and buildings in need of repair where the house belonging to Baha'u'llah's father was located. We entered the house from a side street through an alley way and a tunnel which emerged in the courtyard of the house. There were rooms under the building, a kitchen, storage facilities and an elaborate tiled bath house. We were told it was typical of a rich man's home in Persia in the nineteenth century, surrounded by high walls and a big heavy gate, like a mini-fortress, but greatly reduced in size from the original estate. We were introduced to the caretaker of the house and ushered into the room where Baha'u'llah was born. A large room with floor to ceiling coloured glass windows overlooking the courtyard, the floor was covered with beautiful carpets, little furniture, only a couple of low divans and cushions.

To be in that house was a journey into another world and a glimpse of the culture from which our Faith emerged. We asked the caretaker a question often asked of us in Papua New Guinea and we didn't know the answer, 'What was the name of Baha'u'llah's mother?' Believers in PNG being accustomed to the reverence placed on The Virgin Mary, Christ's mother, wondered why we did not give emphasis to the mother of Baha'u'llah. The answer was Khadija – the same name as the wife of Mohammad.

After Teheran, we flew to Shiraz and were delighted to see forty other members of National Assemblies from around the world on the same plane. On arrival in Shiraz at the International standard airport, built by the Shah for the festival celebrating 2,500 years of the Persian Empire, the caretaker of the House of the Bab, Abdu'l Afnan - a relative of the Bab, met us and invited us to lunch at a local hotel.

Abdu'l-Afnan's family were caretakers of the House of the Bab since Abdul-Baha's time and he said Abdul-Baha told his Grandfather, that pilgrims to the house take a difficult journey across the mountains on donkeys or horseback but in the future Baha'is will arrive out of the sky in great numbers. Mr Afnan said he was overjoyed to live to see that day and to celebrate he that was why he took us all to lunch in a local hotel.

While in Shiraz we visited the House of the Bab at dawn and were allowed private time to pray in the room of the house where the Bab met Mullah Husayn. It was an

overwhelming experience to be in the very place where the Faith was born. The house of the Bab was smaller than the house of Baha'u'llah but built in the same style with a central courtyard, high walls and beautifully coloured windows facing inwards, with a small garden in the centre of the courtyard with a lemon tree in the centre. This tree provided the seeds for the tree that grows in the centre of Baha'u'llah's tomb in Bahji, Israel.

Before leaving the country, we visited Isfahan, the city of rose gardens, blue mosques and splendid parks situated in a valley with a river running through it and backed by high mountains. It was spring when we were there, the trees were all covered with new green leaves and flowers were blooming all over as the city prepared for a visit by the Shah. The streets were decorated with flowers and there was an air of anticipation. At night, gigantic fires blazed on the mountain shaped like a crown, reminding us of the words of the Bab to his disciples the Letters of the Living, they should be like fires on the mountain so bright that all could see them. It was an amazing experience to see Iran in those prosperous days before the Revolution turned the country into chaos and social unrest and the intensive persecution of the Baha'is began again.

Although the above experiences are not strictly connected to the National Assembly I included them as I feel they are relevant to Baha'i history and the opportunity to see them has been made more difficult since 1979. After the shock of the 1978 Revolution when the Shah fled and the country fell into the hands of the religious fanatics all those places have been greatly altered and attitudes against Baha'is has hardened into more cruelty and persecution. The terror imposed on the Baha'i community of Iran sent many people out of the country, forced to use people smugglers to help them escape the persecution and a few of them arrived in Papua New Guinea in the following decades. Only God knows when the situation will improve for the beleaguered friends in Iran.

In December 1973, Papua New Guinea acquired self-government and the Baha'i community arrived at the end of the Nine-Year Plan. During the plan an expansion in numbers had occurred beyond our expectations. The growth was triggered by the arrival of new pioneers and we had four thousand one hundred and sixty-two believers in different regions and sixty-eight local assemblies. We had established a National Office and Centre in Lae and built three Institute buildings in Sogeri, Madina and Arufa but had not been able to acquire a Temple Site.

By 1974 the National Assembly realised the Centre in Swallow Road was too small for our needs and I started looking for a suitable property. We didn't have any cash reserves but Violet Hoehnke gave her house on Air Corps Road to the Assembly when she decided to home front pioneer to Mt. Hagen. However, that house was also too small for our requirements and we realised it would have to be sold but properties had become hard to sell as the expatriate population was shrinking.

During the same period the Lae community was growing assisted by two pioneer families from Port Moresby; David and Sue Podger and their children and Mariette and Ho San Leong with their children. Both families were living on the University

campus and were a very welcome addition to the community. David, Sue, and Ho San were members of the National Assembly and were now available for regular consultation about national matters.

The year before Independence a refugee Baha'i from Irian Jaya, married to Donna Rumere a believer from Manus, arrived in Lae seeking help for his business to buy a copra boat so that he other refugees could travel to different islands to purchase shells. The group of refugees and local people needed us to act as a collection port, their agents in Lae and to sell the shells on the international market. They raised most of the money for the boat amongst Donna's relatives but were short of sufficient capital to run the business. Our company Anisa Commodity traders included John Mills who operated the branch in Rabaul and together we provided some funds. We used our empty warehouse as a storage facility and employed three or four locals to polish and bag the shells. Once that process was complete Noel sold them in bulk to overseas buyers. Lae had become a busy international port, after the war servicing the Highlands, and with Noel's expertise in commodity marketing, the business boomed. The reason for this story here is that the bank now looked favourably on lending us money which enabled us to help the Assembly.

Independence arrived in 1975 and changes were swift in coming, mainly in attitudes, particularly among the Chinese and European population, many of whom felt threatened. This worked in our favour when property prices in Lae began to plunge as families left town in a hurry and weren't being replaced.

The first Independence Day in PNG 16th September 1975 was rather quiet in the morning. In Lae there was a flag lowering ceremony in front of the Council building as the Australian flag came down and the new flag for PNG was raised. I remember feeling full of joy watching this event. Now it was time for PNG to grow up, which is always painful but essential. Only a few people watched the ceremony because many people were afraid and stayed in their homes waiting for repercussions that fortunately did not occur.

On Independence Day, in the afternoon and in the pouring rain Lae hosted a Parade in which a group of Baha'is marched. Our group was the only multi-cultural one in the parade and included Highlanders, both men and women. That was unusual. The women wore their traditional costumes and some of the men played their flutes. Others who marched were several girls from Butibam, Ho San representing the Chinese community, four Australians including Noel, Rita Goryl, and Shirin Podger, children including Sef Homerang from Madina who was then living with the Leongs. The group looked very attractive in their special tee shirts and lap laps and received loud applause as they marched by.

Six pioneers applied for Papua New Guinea Citizenship after Independence and the National Assembly received a letter from the House of Justice which read,

"Will you please convey to Counsellor Violet Hoehnke, Auxiliary Board member Rodney Hancock, Noel and Margaret Bluett, and David and Sue Podger the

assurance of our ardent prayers at the Holy shrines that their applications will be accepted". Their prayers were answered and all the applications were successful.

The Baha'i Marching Group on Independence Day in Lae 1975

The property at Two mile I was hoping to secure for the Centre consisted of five acres of land with a broken-down house on a slight rise. When I asked one of the relatives of the previous owners, why was the property vacant for so long he said 'the house is haunted' or 'masalai I stap long hap'. Apparently, there had been a suicide in the house and the family vacated it but due to its reputation they couldn't sell it. Baha'is are not afraid of ghosts, we just pray for them and they move on. With the funds from the sale of the two houses, Violet Hoehnke's property in Air Corps Road and the Centre in Swallow Road to Anisa, the National Assembly purchased the property with enough money left over from the sale prices to re-build the wrecked house. An all-weather road up the hill was added and the National Assembly had a National Centre with enough land for expansion and the renovated house accommodated the National Office and a caretaker family.
Unfortunately, when all the work was completed the Karava family were transferred to Port Moresby so we needed a new caretaker family. I think we wrote to the National Assembly of the United States or maybe they wrote to us, don't remember exactly how we found David and Anne Hall. We needed a young couple (as they say Papua New Guinea is no country for old men) who might be willing to pioneer to Papua New Guinea. David arrived in the July 1945 closely followed by his young wife Anne and they became resident caretakers of the National Centre for six years. They were ideal for the job, young dedicated believers, healthy and enthusiastic and they loved the local people. David and Anne's family grew quickly as they had two children born in the Centre and needed more room. The National Assembly decided to add a large room to the building big enough for community meetings. It was a valuable addition to the Centre as it separated the local and national activities from the private quarters of the caretakers.

An incident which amused me in those early days was a conversation about the community in Lae I heard from the workers rebuilding the new road. I was working in the National Office at the time as one of the workers asked his boss what did the Baha'is believe. He answered, 'I don't know what they believe but they have a lot of parties.' He was referring no doubt to our musical entertainments and singing during Institute meetings, devotions, teaching meetings and Conventions - always noisy and joyful

The Haziratu'ul Quds and National Centre in Two Mile Markham Road
(Hazirat'u'l Quds in Farsi means 'Dawning Place of Praise')

Two European's living in Lae became Baha'is in the mid-seventies, Ron Pavey and Jeanette Reardon. Ron was married to a woman who lived in Butibam Village and he introduced a few of his wife's relatives to the teachings. Three became believers and were active in events in Lae. One of them, Gwalin, travelled to the Youth Conference in Brisbane in 1975 as did two other young women, Elizabeth Karava from Madina and Janet from Manus and they were the first travel teachers from PNG to meet with

Aboriginal believers. The Elders in Cairns, who met the girls, were very impressed by their radiance. One elderly lady said to me ‘they aren’t like us. They still have their pride’.

Early in 1976, Dr. Sirus Naraqi, originally from Iran, but at that time living with his family in the United States, was interested in pioneering and visited us in Lae to inquire about the possibility of moving to PNG. When he was staying with us one of the Papuan believers, I think it was Saino from Mountain Brown, arrived at the National Centre with a shoe box full of declaration cards from mountain communities in Papua, Afore and Mountain Brown. Dr. Naraqi was amazed at the evidence of local teaching results and was thus convinced PNG was the place for his family. He found a position in Moresby and arrived in 1977 in time to welcome Hand of the Cause Abu’l Qazim Faizi to Papua New Guinea. Mr Faizi was ill at the time and was unable to do much travelling around the country but we spent a week with him and basked in his love. He was an extraordinary man, much loved by Baha’is all over the planet. He was fascinated with the Papuan people he did meet and we felt blessed to be in his presence before he passed away on his radiant journey to the Abha Kingdom.

In 1977 Noel and Ho San were appointed as Auxiliary Board members and at the Ridvan elections our eldest son Michael was elected to the National Assembly and became Chairman thus replacing his father. For the first time, I was privileged to have one of my children serve on the National Assembly with me.

The new National Centre in Lae expanded through the generosity of a believer from Malaysia, Errol Seow whose company built Ramu Sugar factory and staff housing. He was responsible for the building of the Shiraz Institute on the Two-Mile property.

The Shiraz Institute in Lae

His company had materials left over from the building of the Ramu Sugar project and offered to donate them to the Faith. He asked me what we needed and remembering that Hand of the Cause Mr. Faizi said on the subject of deepening illiterate believers, ‘concentrate your efforts on the youth and start schools’. I asked Errol if he would build us a school at the National Centre. He drew the plans in Malaysia and brought his own workers to Lae to build it. Thanks to Errol we now had a large Institute/school building at the Centre the National Assembly named The Shiraz Institute. It contained dormitories, class rooms, an assembly hall with facilities of toilets, showers and a kitchen which allowed us to hold institutes, National Conventions, and NSA meetings in Lae, a wonderful asset.

The third International Convention to elect the Universal House of justice was held in 1978 and six members of the National Assembly travelled to Haifa for this event, Aminio Bale, and Habib Yaganegi from Rabaul, Margaret and Michael Bluett, Mariette and Ho San Leong from Lae. When the delegates returned from the Convention the newspaper Lae Nius printed a story about the Convention and a summary about the Faith with a photo of the delegates standing front of the Shrine of the Bab. We were fortunate in our relationship with the media in Papua New

Guinea who were always sympathetic and willing to print articles about the Baha'is if it included a news item.

After the International Convention, the House of Justice revealed a Seven Year plan for the Baha'i world which for PNG included the goal of taking the Faith to unopened islands and increase the number of local assemblies. Consequently, the National Assembly had concerns about how many of the one hundred and twenty local assemblies already listed ever met or functioned in any way at all. All the LSA elections and the election of their delegates and assisting them to travel to convention needed visitors to facilitate the process either a travel teacher, Auxiliary Board Member, or an Assembly member. Most rural communities needed this help and we didn't know how many of them would do an election without a visitor. The National Assembly decided to announce the elections in the Kundu – the local national news sheet - which we had just begun to publish and distribute, but not to send special representatives to remote communities. We were delighted with the results because eighty assemblies sent reports and did their elections. But when the statistics went to Haifa alarm bells rang and we were asked in serious terms 'what had happened'. Even though we explained the reason we were asked not to do it again. I sometimes felt as though statistics officers did not understand our limited resources, dealing with people who lived in difficult places, no roads, steep mountains, islands, and villages in swamps, up rivers, believers mostly illiterate, living in straitened subsistence economies and the difficulties and cost of sending visitors to all these areas.

Counsellor Tinai Hancock on her first meeting in Lae with Auxiliary Board members, Lundeng Capenias, Roger Edwards, Ruhi Mills, Roslyn Bale, Elti Kunak, Noel Bluett and Tinai

PNG community acquired a new Counsellor after the elections in 1978, Tinai Hancock from Fiji. She was a wonderful Counsellor who understood the role perfectly. The second arm of the Faith was established to advise and inspire the believers and of course the National Assembly. The Beloved Guardian said about Hands and their assistants the Auxiliary Board members, it was their role to 'spread the fragrance'. I remember that phrase after 1954 Shoghi Effendi sent every Hand of the Cause travelling around the world to meet with pioneers and to anoint them with a perfume the Attar of Roses and tell them the Guardian loved them. My husband and I were thus privileged to welcome to our pioneer post in remote New South Wales two Hands of the Cause in 1953.

Fulfilling the goal of creating new communities in remote islands was difficult in PNG due to the uncertain availability of sea transport. Noel Bluett in his role as an Auxiliary Board Member decided to learn to fly and when he qualified as a pilot he purchased a small single engine plane and could fly travel teachers into remote centres thus saving them the difficulties of using slow sea transport. His plane also proved useful to reach isolated coastal villages and mountain regions newly opening to the Faith and he could do it swiftly without cost to the National Assembly. There were no believers in the Dentrecasteaux Group southeast of the mainland in the

Milne Bay Province of which Goodenough Island was the largest. Noel decided to fly to the Island, which had an airstrip, with two travel teachers, Lopena Vera and his cousin Karl Vera. He left them on the island at the airstrip and returned a week later to find them waiting for him at the airstrip with a group of islanders loaded down with gifts of food and mats. The boys had made friends on the island and one man had already become a Baha'i.

A Baha'i Family in Bena Bena – Eastern Highlands

One of the major concerns of the National Assembly was the difficulty of deepening the friends in the regions where schools for children had never been established, where subsistence economy left the people with inadequate incomes to travel or to organise their own access to the outside world. Most of the villages in the Highlands regions had little or no infrastructure, such as roads or an airstrip to allow outsiders to reach them. Then even the most intrepid travel teachers or visitors had to rely on oral teaching and deepening. The people with a long history of an oral culture are quite skilled at remembering stories but in the early days of the Faith remote villagers were mostly unaware of the outside world nor had their life experiences equipped them to understand concepts other than those of their own culture. Nevertheless, the idea of being one family with all people was very attractive to them and many wanted to become Baha'is, they loved to have visitors, but unless regular visits of teachers could be organised as soon as the outside world did reach them the attractions of materialism were so strong that years later it was much harder to inspire the concept of a spiritual life or the notion of a new world order no longer interested them.

9

1972

Stage one volcano

A Tidle wave and you only removed your shoes

14 July 1971.

Hamlin Walker was sitting on a bar stool at the Travelodge Rabaul when a magnitude 7-plus earthquake rocked the harbour.

The ground lurched, bottles rattled, patrons screamed and then a tsunami swept through the pool area.

People scattered in every direction.

Except Hamlin.

Hamlin calmly took off his shoes, rolled up his trousers and kept drinking.

Even after the sea retreated and some very sheepish patrons drifted back, there he still was, guarding the bar like a lighthouse keeper.

That earthquake triggered Stage 1 volcanic alert for Rabaul — although “alert” may be overstating it. It was more of a classified rumour. The authorities seemed to think if nobody said the word “volcano” out loud perhaps the volcano itself might forget.

Fast forward to Saturday 29 October 1983.

I was standing on my soapbox in the Malaguna Road Works yard auctioning government vehicles when a small earthquake rattled through.

Nobody panicked. In Rabaul earthquakes were almost part of the weather forecast.

“Fine morning, chance of showers, slight earth tremor after lunch.”

But by Monday Stage 2 volcanic alert had been declared.

Which raised the obvious question:what happened to Stage 1?

Apparently we’d already used that in 1971 and quietly misplaced it somewhere in a filing cabinet.

The strange thing about 1983 was there wasn’t one giant killer earthquake. The biggest quakes were only around magnitude 4, but there were hundreds, then thousands of shallow volcanic earthquakes under the caldera.

Volcanologists became overnight celebrities.

Every statement was analysed harder than rugby team selections.

“Ground deformation around Tavurvur increasing…”

Translation in the pub:“We’re all doomed.”

Then came the reports. Big bad reports. Maps, fault lines, uplift charts, eruption scenarios. I studied them in great detail despite not understanding half the scientific words.

Business promptly went into cardiac arrest.

Nobody wanted to invest in a town that might explode.

The new growth industry became volcano planning.

People discussed evacuation routes over beer.Land values depended on which side of the caldera you lived.Every rumble produced twenty new experts.

I sent my small boys to stay with my mother in Lae for the next term.

I kept my first wife in Rabaul for family planning purposes.

In hindsight this may not have been my strongest negotiating position as a husband.

For the next eleven years Rabaul lived in a strange limbo:

part tropical paradise,

part geological experiment,

part betting agency on when the mountain would blow.

And through it all, somewhere in my mind, I could still picture Hamlin Walker barefoot at the Travelodge bar thinking:“If the sea’s coming in again somebody better buy another round.”

1972

Chess

Chess Olympiad Haifa

Checkmate… Almost

Dad loved chess. In Canberra we seemed to have a revolving door of visiting chess players. They'd arrive for a tournament, somehow end up sleeping on our couch, and before long our lounge room looked like the United Nations of chess. Dad tried to teach all six of us kids. The results were… mixed. Some of us learned strategy, some learned how to lose gracefully, and some just learned how to knock the pieces over.

When we moved to PNG, Dad became president of the national chess federation. Not because he was the country's strongest player—he'd have been the first to admit that—but because he was the sort of fellow who actually turned up to meetings, filled in the forms and remembered where the trophies were. In Lae I eventually became president of the local chess club myself, largely because everyone else looked at the floor when nominations were called.

For a while Dad and I even sold chess computers. They were the latest thing. They could beat most club players and cost a fortune. Today, of course, every phone has a stronger chess engine than the combined brainpower of every computer we sold. Progress can be very humbling.

One of the great perks of being PNG Chess President was representing the country at the Chess Olympiad in Haifa, Israel—the spiritual and administrative world centre of our Bahá'í Faith. Dad was in heaven: chess by day, pilgrimage whenever he could.

Then came the move that no grandmaster could have predicted.

After a game, Dad wandered off and accidentally left his briefcase behind. Unfortunately, inside was his chess clock… still ticking.

In Israel, an unattended ticking briefcase tends to attract a little more attention than a forgotten umbrella.

The Israeli Defence Force sprang into action. The area was cleared. The suspicious package was whisked away to the desert. Experts gathered. A safe distance was established. Out came the crowbar, ready for the controlled detonation.

One mighty whack later…

…silence.

The "bomb" turned out to be a perfectly innocent chess clock faithfully counting down the last few minutes of Dad's game.

I can only imagine the sheepish phone call.

“Mr Bluett… we have some good news and some slightly awkward news. Your briefcase is safe. It has, however, undergone a rather thorough security inspection.”

Only Dad could start an international bomb scare armed with nothing more dangerous than a Sicilian Defence.

1973

Go west young man

Sydney to the Perth youth conference by bike, van and hitchhike by hook or by crook

GO WEST, YOUNG MAN — 1973

Dad had lost his job.

My college fees for ’73 weren’t paid, and I certainly wasn’t going to burden Dad with the cost of flying me back to PNG.

So there was only one sensible solution.

Go west, young man!

There was a Bahá’í Youth Conference in Perth, and the Perth Bahá’ís were a fun bunch. That sounded like sufficient career planning to me.

First stop was Orange, NSW, where a friend agreed to put me up while I accumulated some travelling money.

I worked at the Email fridge factory and then at a wool-topping firm at Canobolas. My mate eventually found work on a fruit farm at Berri in South Australia, so naturally we headed off on our Russian motorbikes.

What could possibly go wrong?

Surprisingly, not much.

We saved enough money for the big trip west, rode down to Adelaide and parked up the bikes.

There we joined an even more foolhardy bunch.

Eight of us had somehow acquired an old Commer van for $175.

Eight young people.

One $175 van.

Destination: Perth.

Again, what could possibly go wrong?

We made it as far as Iron Knob.

And then an iron knob — or something equally important — appeared through the side of the engine block.

Our $175 transcontinental express had become a roadside monument.

My mate and I decided hitchhiking was now the more reliable form of transport.

We even split up to improve our chances.

Late that night, a car passed me.

Then stopped.

Then turned around.

Then came back.

This did not look promising.

I was convinced I was about to be mugged, so I stuffed my money into my socks and hid in a culvert.

About 2 am a voice called out:

“Wanna lift?”

“Yes,” came my rather diffident reply from the drain.

As it turned out, they had been equally worried that I might mug them.

Two groups of terrified Australians, each convinced the other was dangerous.

I asked them to pick up my somewhat bigger mate farther down the road.

That probably didn’t improve their confidence.

Eventually they dropped us in the middle of nowhere, where we found a comfortable patch of grass and slept until morning.

Next day we finally reached Ceduna — gateway to the Nullarbor.

The local policeman gave me some helpful legal advice.

Apparently hitchhiking on the road in South Australia was illegal.

But if I stood on the footpath and asked for a lift, that was okay.

He then added, very kindly, that if I couldn’t find a ride, I could sleep in the police cell for my own safety.

I’ll keep that in mind.

A few minutes later a fast car stopped.

“Where are you going?”

“Perth.”

So was he.

About 1,200 miles.

Nearly 2,000 kilometres.

And he wanted company.

I had just scored what must surely rank among the longest hitchhiking rides in Australian history.

By nightfall we'd covered the roughly 500 km to Eucla, near the Western Australian border.

He took a motel room.

I slept on the floor.

Luxury accommodation compared with the previous night's paddock.

At 6 am we were off again.

And this bloke didn't believe in wasting daylight.

100 mph.

That's 160 km/h for those born after Australia discovered kilometres.

Hour after hour across the Nullarbor.

His speedometer seemed less important than the engine-temperature gauge.

We'd roar up a rise until the road simply disappeared into the horizon, then plunge down the other side.

Stop for fuel.

Stop for food.

Check the temperature.

Then back to 100 mph.

Finally, at about 6 pm, we rolled into Perth.

Wacko!

I'd made it.

Orange to Berri on Russian motorbikes.

Adelaide to Iron Knob in a $175 Commer van.

Iron Knob to Ceduna by thumb.

Ceduna to Perth at 100 mph with a complete stranger.

And somehow I still had the money I'd hidden in my socks.

Tomorrow: the return journey.

Because apparently getting to Perth wasn’t enough adventure for one year. 😂

1973

Coffee futures

Reset his future

Dad did six years with the Coffee Marketing Board and in those days we lived in town in the Farmers and Settlers building, conveniently located next to his office. His commute involved roughly twenty paces and one set of stairs. Peak efficiency.

Eventually we moved to West Goroka, in the same street as the school, at the end of a long avenue lined with pine trees. Life was positively cheesy in those days.

Then Dad had one of his bright ideas.

He approached all the big coffee names — the Collinses, the Leahys and the other plantation families — and proposed an export company. Danny Leahy held over 50%, Dad had 10%, and the remaining 40% was shared among the other families.

Success followed quickly.

We moved back into town, roasted our own coffee and suddenly life became cottage cheese. We even had our own little bungalow out the back for us kids, complete with a ping-pong table. By Goroka standards we were practically landed gentry.

Dad recruited one of our Bahá'í friends, an African-American manager named Jim. In the Highlands in the early 1970s that probably ruffled a few feathers, but to everyone's credit nobody said much about it.

Then Dad made a mistake.

Actually, two mistakes.

The first was discovering coffee futures, put options, call options and whatever the other ones are called. Financial instruments designed, as far as I can tell, to transfer money from optimistic people to confident people.

Dad tried explaining them to Jim.

He tried explaining them to me.

Jim and I exchanged the same look.

"Run that past me again?"

The trouble with futures trading is that the futures eventually become the present and demand answers.

Unfortunately Dad then departed for Israel as a PNG delegate to the 1973 Bahá'í elections. In those days, when you went to Israel, people generally respected the concept of a spiritual retreat.

There was no mobile phone.

No email.

No WhatsApp.

No “just checking in”.

No forwarding calls.

The market, however, remained stubbornly open for business.

Prices moved.

Deadlines approached.

Options expired.

Apparently when prices go up you have to do one thing, and when they go down you have to do an entirely different thing. Jim understood this only marginally better than I did.

I still feel sorry for Jim.

He has sadly passed away now, but I remain in touch with his lovely wife. Between the three of us, I don’t think any of us ever fully understood coffee futures.

Dad eventually returned from Israel and made his second mistake.

He covered for his man.

In doing so, he effectively covered for himself as well.

The board eventually discovered what had happened and showed him the door.

At the time it felt like a disaster.

As it turned out, it was merely the universe clearing its throat before introducing the next chapter.

And that chapter turned out rather well.

1973-1975

Dad's first businesses in Lae

The laundry, the boiler and the second-hand klos

Dad's First Businesses in Lae

Dad found himself unexpectedly unemployed in 1973/74 but, as luck would have it, Australian companies were heading for the exits faster than passengers hearing “last call for boarding.”

Dad effectively became his own mergers and acquisitions department.

First acquisition target: the Lae Laundry.

The departing owners had only one condition:

“Pay us out in Australian dollars. We trust you. We don’t trust the kina.”

This turned out to be excellent timing because shortly afterwards the kina arrived and, inconveniently for their theory, became stronger than the Australian dollar. Timing in business, like comedy, is everything.

The laundry came complete with a large industrial boiler.

This terrified Dad.

Accountants are naturally suspicious of anything involving pressure vessels, steam and the possibility of appearing in the newspaper.

His solution was simple: recruit a plumber as a partner. The plumber happened to be married to one of our Bahá’í friends, which in those days was basically our version of due diligence.

The dry-cleaning side of the business quickly revealed itself to be a mugs game.

The business model appeared to be:

1. Pour expensive toxic chemicals onto somebody else’s expensive dress.

2. Hope for the best.

3. Charge ten dollars.

4. Receive a twenty-dollar complaint.

Customer satisfaction levels varied considerably.

The army, unfortunately, had developed a strong commitment to not paying their bills.

The shipping companies did pay, so maritime commerce effectively subsidised military preparedness.

But the real opportunity lay elsewhere.

There was mountains of unclaimed laundry.

Apparently quite a few people in PNG adopted the optimistic strategy of dropping off clothes and trusting that destiny would eventually return them.

Dad cut a hole-in-the-wall window into the warehouse and suddenly second-hand klos became a thing.

The legendary aussie charity Smith family discovered us and soon there was a steady stream of customers beating a path to our door.

Dad rented a shop in the Attic Building a few doors away from the dry cleaners.

Soon he was selling wholesale to other shops.

Some items were sold retail.

Some were sold by weight.

Some probably had fascinating back stories that nobody wanted explained.

The important thing was that business was booming.

Then Independence arrived in 1975 and the kina strengthened, making those earlier demands for Australian dollars look slightly less inspired.

Dad bought out his partner, who, if we’re being brutally fair, had contributed less than the boiler and considerably less than the customers’ abandoned trousers.

The first business was underway.

In PNG there was a saying that if you got established before Independence, you were home and hosed.

Given Dad owned a laundry, being hosed was entirely appropriate.

1974

Perth to Sydney

4 rides to Perth a cross section of Australian society underbelly even

Perth to Sydney — Part Two: The Hitchhiking Odyssey

Putting aside the great time we all had in Perth, the trip home was a saga of Odyssey proportions.

I got myself out of Perth, found the road east and stuck out my thumb.

And waited.

And waited.

Eventually I resorted to prayer.

It worked — sort of.

A truck loaded with empty drums pulled over. The driver informed me that he never picked up hitchhikers.

Apparently I was his one lapse in judgement.

Unfortunately, loaded with empty drums and battling what felt like a permanent headwind, we were travelling at approximately the speed of continental drift.

I wanted to get home.

So what did this innocent young Bahá’í do?

I said some more prayers.

Could I please have a faster lift?

There are occasions in life when you should be very careful about the wording of your prayers.

Out in the middle of nowhere, a car pulled up near us with a flat tyre. I helped the driver change it and naturally asked where he was going.

Sydney!

Wonderful. I only needed Adelaide for now.

I jumped in.

Almost immediately every instinct I possessed began screaming:

THIS MAN IS SHADY.

When I casually mentioned that the police had stopped me earlier in my travels, he suddenly wanted to turn around and go back.

Why?

I had no idea, but I was becoming increasingly convinced that my latest answered prayer had a criminal record.

At the next roadside food stop I decided Adelaide could wait for somebody else.

I went around asking if anyone was heading that way.

A couple of roadworks subcontractors were.

One looked at me and asked:

“Do you like speed?”

I was an innocent religious kid.

I thought he was offering me drugs.

Turns out he meant velocity.

That seemed marginally better, so I climbed in.

Then I noticed the 24 stubbies.

These were apparently travelling provisions.

The subcontractors proceeded to drink them almost as fast as they were driving.

The speed limit was 100 km/h.

We were doing about 160.

And the seat belt in the back didn’t work.

Suddenly the slow truck with the empty drums seemed like a magnificent example of responsible public transport.

I was terrified.

And at almost exactly that time, hundreds of kilometres away in Sydney, my mother suddenly woke in my grandmother’s house with an overwhelming feeling that something was terribly wrong.

My grandmother had recently died, and Mum and Dad had flown down from PNG to settle the estate.

Mum got out of bed and paced the floor for about an hour, praying fervently for me.

Meanwhile, her son was hurtling across Australia in an unofficial roadworks Grand Prix with two increasingly well-refreshed subcontractors.

Eventually we reached a town and one bloke got out.

The remaining driver turned to me.

“I’m too drunk to drive. You drive.”

Excellent.

There was one small problem.

I needed glasses to drive.

I didn’t have them.

Nevertheless, compared with him I was now clearly the designated responsible adult.

So off I went at about 70 mph.

From the passenger seat came:

“FASTER!”

No bloody way.

I’d had enough answered prayers for one day.

Eventually he dropped me outside a town, reasoning that I’d have a better chance of getting another lift there.

Normally when hitchhiking I wouldn’t stop to eat — every minute spent eating was a minute in which the perfect lift might sail past.

This time I was so rattled I didn’t care.

I sat down at a service station and took my time.

A respectable-looking couple had apparently been watching me.

They came over and offered me a lift to Adelaide.

There was even a suit hanging in the back of their car.

Suits!

After my recent travelling companions, this was practically a character reference from the Queen.

I climbed into the back seat, lay down and slept almost all the way to Adelaide.

Back in Sydney, Mum woke the following morning perfectly calm.

“Paul’s okay,” she announced.

“He’ll ring on Tuesday.”

On Tuesday, I rang.

Apparently my recently departed grandmother had given Mum the skinny.

So I survived Perth to Adelaide through prayer, hitchhiking, a possible criminal, 24 stubbies, 160 km/h roadworkers, a broken seat belt, driving without my glasses — and finally salvation in the form of a respectable couple with a suit hanging in the back.

There was still one minor problem.

I was in Adelaide.

My motorbike was in Adelaide.

And Sydney was still a very long way away.

Next episode: The Bike Ride to Sydney 🏍️

1974

Bugandi Jack

Donna’s dad

Bugandi Jack

Some people are remembered by the buildings they leave behind. Others by the people they shape.

Henry Robert “Jack” Amesbury was firmly in the second category.

To generations of Papua New Guineans he was simply “Bugandi Jack”, the legendary principal of Bugandi High School in Lae. Long before leadership courses and motivational speakers became fashionable, Jack was quietly producing leaders. His classroom extended far beyond the school gates. He expected discipline, integrity, hard work and respect, and thousands of young men and women carried those values into every corner of Papua New Guinea.

Education was only part of his passion. He believed sport built character, and Bugandi became a powerhouse on the rugby league field. Many who passed through his hands would go on to become leaders in government, business, education and the professions, but they never forgot the man who demanded the best of them.

Legends are rarely loud. They are built over decades, one student at a time.

Yesterday, while visiting Haus Pikinini in Wau, I was reminded that legacies often continue through the next generation. Jack’s daughter, Donna, has devoted her life to caring for children who have nowhere else to turn. Through love, patience and extraordinary generosity she has created a family for many who would otherwise have none.

A father who educated thousands. A daughter who has embraced and raised children as her own.

Different callings, the same spirit of service.

Papua New Guinea has been fortunate to have both.

1974

Anisa

Anisa a shell of a beginning



Anisa — a shell of a beginning!

On 9 May 1974, my 20th birthday, my father and John Mills formed Anisa, a company trading in commercial seashells, with branches in Rabaul and Lae. While I was celebrating turning 20, they were getting down to shell business.

In December 1977, I returned to Lae with my wife and our six-month-old first son and joined accountants Touche Ross on a two-year contract. A sensible career, a young family, a steady salary. Naturally, something had to come along and upset all that.

As my contract neared its end, John rang Dad with an offer: would we like to buy Gazelle Agencies and his half of Anisa?

Dad chose me over my older brother Michael, the lawyer. Perhaps he thought an accountant would count the risks, whereas a lawyer might actually read them.

We sealed the deal over a weekend: no deposit, no interest and five years to pay. Two houses and an office were included. Even then, I couldn’t resist asking John to throw a one-way ticket back into the price. He agreed. Apparently, buying the business was fine, but paying my own airfare was a bridge too far.

On 4 January 1980, we moved to Rabaul and began our grand adventure. My wife and I now owned one and a half companies, a mortgage and an overdraft. Nothing says “we’ve made it” quite like owing money in several different ways.

We rolled up our sleeves, raised our family and worked hard to make it all happen. John had given us an extraordinary opportunity, and we were determined to make the most of it.

For us, Anisa represents the tree of life — growth, resilience and prosperity. Although in those early days, the tree needed a fair bit of watering and the bank was keeping an eye on the roots.

The photo shows a trochus shell, a reminder of where it all began. Who would have thought a seashell could help change the course of our lives?

The volcano eventually destroyed the house I’d bought. Rabaul has a rather dramatic approach to property redevelopment.

But the family, the business and the adventure carried on. We’d started with shells, borrowed money and a generous seller — and built something very special.

Craig Volker best expat pidgin speaker

My linguistic friend

My candidate for PNG's best contemporary Tok Pisin speaker — Professor Craig Volker

If we are looking for the best contemporary Tok Pisin speaker — particularly among people who did not grow up speaking it — I would like to nominate my old friend Professor Craig Alan Volker.

My connection with Craig goes back 52 years.

I first met him on the Gold Coast when I was single. He was teaching languages at Miami State High School and was newly married to his African-American wife.

Somehow, in the course of our friendship, I persuaded him that coming to Papua New Guinea was a good idea.

Fortunately, he listened!

Craig joined the PNG Department of Education in 1980 and spent nearly six years teaching at Aiyura National High School and Passam National High School, including serving as Head of English.

From 1989 to 1991 he was Senior Lecturer at Goroka Teachers College, now the University of Goroka. He later returned to PNG as Professor of Linguistic Research at Divine Word University in Madang.

Academically, his credentials are formidable.

He has a BA with Honours in German and English from the University of Montana, a Master of Literary Studies from the University of Queensland, a Graduate Diploma in TESOL, and a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Hawai'i.

His master's research produced the first linguistic description of Unserdeutsch — Rabaul Creole German, the extraordinary German-based creole that developed around the Vunapope community.

For his doctorate he produced a grammar of Nalik, a language of New Ireland.

Craig didn't just study Nalik from an academic distance. He became part of the community and holds the traditional title Wangpaang — Assistant Talking Chief — of the Moxomaraba or Sea Eagle Clan of the Nalik people of New Ireland.

And then there is Tok Pisin.

Craig has spent decades studying, speaking, teaching and writing about the language. He was General Editor of the Oxford Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin English Dictionary and has taught Tok Pisin internationally, including as Visiting Professor of Tok Pisin Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University.

For roughly the last ten years, many Papua New Guineans have also come to know Craig through his regular newspaper articles in The National, writing about language, culture and the fascinating ways Papua New Guineans communicate.

But my connection with Craig goes well beyond linguistics.

We served together on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Papua New Guinea, and we even travelled to Israel together.

Craig also made a contribution that is particularly personal to me.

When I was producing my prayer book containing prayers in many of PNG's languages, Craig worked with his students and helped facilitate translations into around 20 different PNG languages.

In a country of more than 800 languages, that was no small undertaking.

Craig's own linguistic range is extraordinary. He has high-level proficiency in English, German, Tok Pisin and Nalik, as well as knowledge of French, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Bahasa Indonesia and Esperanto.

His academic career has taken him through PNG, Australia, Japan, Germany, Switzerland and China, and today he is associated with the Cairns Institute at James Cook University.

But qualifications alone aren't why I nominate him.

Craig has lived PNG's languages.

He taught in the Highlands, worked in Madang, researched in Rabaul and New Ireland, became part of a Nalik community, documented Unserdeutsch, helped document and teach Tok Pisin, worked with students on numerous PNG languages and, through his newspaper column, continues sharing that knowledge with Papua New Guineans today.

For me there is also the pleasure of looking back over 52 years of friendship.

We met on the Gold Coast. I persuaded him to come to PNG. We later served together on the NSA, worked together on those prayer translations and travelled to Israel together.

So here is my nomination:

Professor Craig Volker — my candidate for the best contemporary Tok Pisin speaker.

After 52 years, I suppose I can claim just a tiny bit of reflected glory.

I persuaded him to come to PNG.

I opened the door.

Papua New Guinea did the rest. 😄

1975-1996

No-go zones and short cuts

Bougainville by Iroquois, armoured Land Rover and the chicken run

No-Go Zones and Short Cuts

After gaining my PNG citizenship (about 1975) I discovered one of the great benefits of nationhood: I could finally start businesses without every second form asking awkward questions about where I was born. As luck would have it, opportunity arose in the most politically sensitive place in PNG — North Solomons Province, Bougainville. Naturally.

The business went well for a few years until 1989 when things went pear-shaped at high speed and with automatic weapons.

By 1991 the government was flying businessmen into Buka in Defence Force aircraft to inspect what remained of commerce. Nothing boosts investor confidence like arriving in a war zone in military transport.

I ventured out toward Malasang and found one of my old dealers — former staff — sitting there with a suitcase of cash under his bed waiting to restart business. Classic Bougainville entrepreneurship: no banks, no security, just a suitcase and optimism.

The government later flew me into Wakunai in one of those Israeli-built bubble planes, the Arava — an aircraft that looked less like a plane and more like somebody forgot to finish building it.

The Defence Force held the airstrip. Beyond that… opinions varied.

From Wakunai I boarded an Iroquois helicopter. Inside the aluminium hull were pellet indentations and broken Perspex from previous gunfire encounters during the crisis. Exactly the sort of details nervous passengers love to inspect before take-off.

Flying low through mist into Loloho was probably one of the scariest moments of my life.

The Resistance fighters wore white bandanas. I never saw the BRA red bandanas. Which was apparently considered encouraging.

Standing on my old Mobil drum-fill platform at Loloho, admiring memories and survival simultaneously, one of the shotgun-carrying Resistance boys barked: “Get down! You make too good a target!” Nothing quite restores humility like being informed your body positioning is tactically inconvenient.

An armoured Land Rover then took us into Arawa along what everyone casually called “the chicken run” — a cheerful term for a no-man’s-land road where people preferred not to stop moving.

Slowly commerce returned to most of Bougainville, except around Panguna where the words “no-go zone” retained their literal meaning. Eventually I decided to visit Arawa again commercially. I flew into Buka intending to catch a PMV south. A very dark gentleman with an even darker manner quietly informed me: “We know why you going to Arawa. If you go, you will be killed.” Not exactly Tourism Promotion Authority material.

So, I sensibly flew back to Rabaul. Then I immediately rang my friend Philip, a BRA divisional commander, and asked if he could escort me into Arawa with a few armed associates. He arrived with a machine gun, a rifle, a pistol, a bayonet, and enough muscle to invade a medium-sized village.

Perfectly normal customer service arrangements for the early 1990s. The amusing part was that once we arrived, I was largely left alone to visit customers while my ominous escort group lounged around looking terrifying.

I suggested to my armed friend that perhaps he should build a guest house because people like me might prefer not sleeping in random locations during civil conflict. To his credit, he did.

Unfortunately, success, money and three wives eventually distracted him from hospitality management and the business faded.

On my next trip from Buka to Arawa I dispensed with bodyguards altogether. Word had spread I was “protected,” which in Bougainville was apparently better than travel insurance.

The bridges were still bombed out from the war, so travel involved improvisation. At one swollen river crossing the driver of the ubiquitous Toyota Land Cruiser troop carrier calmly instructed: “Put luggage on seat. Take off shoes and socks.” Never comforting.

We plunged into the flooded river. Water burst through the floorboards while the wheels seemed to skim the tops of submerged rocks. Everyone looked perfectly relaxed except me, who was mentally preparing to meet ancestors from several cultures simultaneously.

After finishing business in Arawa I went for a walk for exercise. I noticed a stern-looking fellow standing on the footpath holding a machete, so I drifted casually toward the middle of the road.

The guys on the opposite side found this absolutely hilarious. Easy for them.

I haven’t been back for quite a while now, but the memories remain crystal clear: part war story, part business trip, part black comedy, and entirely Bougainville.

Lae headmaster joins the Bahai Faith

Alan Hooper Lisa’s favourite primary headmaster details emerge from his funeral

Mr Hooper — A Connection We Never Knew

Every now and then someone from your past reappears, and suddenly you discover that the connection was much deeper than you ever realised.

Mr Alan Hooper was one of those people.

For many of us who lived in Lae, Mr Hooper will always be remembered as the headmaster of Bulae School — one of those old-school headmasters who seemed to be part of the furniture of the place. Generations of children passed through the school, and inevitably Mr Hooper became woven into the lives of their families as well.

He certainly became woven into ours.

Over the years he was involved, directly or indirectly, with so many members of our family that his name became part of our family’s PNG story. At the time, though, he was simply Mr Hooper, the headmaster.

Life moved on, as it does.

Children grew up. Families scattered. People who had shared that extraordinary PNG life went their separate ways, and Mr Hooper eventually returned to Australia.

Then came a wonderful piece of information I had never known.

Alan Hooper had become a Bahá’í.

For me that was quite a revelation.

The man who had crossed paths with our family so many times in Lae had, somewhere along his own journey, discovered the Bahá’í Faith — the same Faith that has played such an enormous part in our family’s life.

And yet we never knew.

There is something rather beautiful about that.

We often think we know the people who populate our childhood and our family history: the teachers, headmasters, neighbours, bosses and family friends. But usually we only know the small part of their story that happened to intersect with ours.

Alan Hooper had his own journey.

His eventually took him to Byron Bay, where he died and was buried on Friday

So somewhere around Byron Bay lies the former headmaster of Bulae, a man remembered by generations of Lae schoolchildren, who became part of our family story without any of us appreciating just how much else we would eventually have in common.

PNG has a funny way of doing that.

The country scatters people all over the world, and then, sometimes decades later, joins the dots.

In Mr Hooper’s case, there was one final dot I never expected.

Mr Hooper, our old headmaster, had become a fellow Bahá’í.

I only wish we had known while he was still alive.

Ps one of my sisters had him for a headmaster all her primary years

One of my sisters worked alongside him and my mother and he had long conversations about life, good friends my mum would be pleased with the news and happy to meet him in the next life.

1977

Five houses

Home invasion

Five Houses, One Volcano and a Party Line

When we first arrived in Lae to begin work with Cox Johnston, we were rewarded with a downstairs flat on the northern corner of Huon Road and Boundary Road. It was a practical little place with one notable design feature: the curtains. They were sheers. Their principal function appeared to be filtering sunlight while providing the public with uninterrupted theatre.

One evening I was at the office wrestling with Chartered Accountancy assignments. I imagined myself laying the foundations of a distinguished professional career. Meanwhile, back at the flat, my rather generously endowed wife was changing in the bedroom with the lights on when she became aware that somebody was trying to force his way inside.

She rang the office.

Sadly, while I could explain the finer points of depreciation, I had absolutely no idea how to operate Cox Johnston’s switchboard. The call never reached me.

Her next attempt was my parents’ house in Karoka Place. Normally the telephone would ring unanswered because everyone believed that if news was important enough it would still be there in the morning. By one of life’s happier accidents, my older brother Michael answered.

Within five minutes he was outside, horn blaring like the Seventh Cavalry. The gentleman attempting to enter our flat decided that discretion was the better part of criminal enterprise and melted into the Lae night.

We moved out immediately.

The following night the empty flat was broken into again. Nothing whatsoever was stolen. That convinced us the intruder’s intentions had never involved burglary.

Steamships owned about forty houses in Lae at the time and, as large organisations often do, decided that rents should suddenly become much more educational.

My father wasn’t interested in becoming a property baron, but I persuaded him to buy a house in Malay Town for K17,000. It had fruit trees, delightful mixed-race neighbours and, most importantly, my employer as the tenant. It is always satisfying when somebody else’s payroll contributes to your family’s investment strategy.

The house transformed our lives. I finished my Chartered studies there. Another son arrived safely at Angau Hospital. We employed a nanny and a house boy.

The house boy’s only serious objection to the position was cloth nappies. He regarded washing them as a breach of basic human rights.

My ex-wife took a job at the Lae Laundry and Dry Cleaning shop, which had the curious side effect of ensuring I was late for work almost every morning. Domestic logistics proved to be a greater challenge than advanced accounting.

Working for my parents added another layer of entertainment. Whenever family tensions reached boiling point, my wife would ring me from the office phone to explain exactly what she thought of my family.

What she hadn’t realised was that the office still operated a party line.

Dad was quietly listening.

To my lasting credit—or perhaps my lifelong cowardice—I had mastered the art of saying nothing that could later be quoted against me.

Then one day Dad’s business partner casually asked, “Do one of the boys want to take over the business?”

Sometimes your life changes because of years of careful planning.

Sometimes it changes because of one sentence over the phone.

Twenty-four hours later we owned three houses in Rabaul.

It felt like remarkable progress.

Then came the volcano.

All three houses were crushed.

Over the months that followed we became nomads with furniture. We lived first in temporary accommodation at Put Put. Then we occupied the Mobil depot manager’s house, thoughtfully designed as bachelors’ quarters complete with curfew conditions that made us feel as though we’d joined the military without noticing.

Next came a large house at Nunga Nunga, where we dug our possessions out from beneath volcanic ash and spent days washing grey dust off everything we owned, usually only to discover more ash underneath.

When the telephones finally came back to life we moved again, this time to a house at Vuvumadiring.

By now we thought we had become experts in domestic instability.

Then little Eliot, our fifth son, quietly wandered out of the house and headed straight into the sea.

Fortunately a Haus Meri spotted him before he could conduct any serious research into buoyancy.

That was enough excitement for one address.

We rented the fenced house next door— paluat Finter’s old place—and, almost unbelievably, stayed there long enough to unpack properly.

Looking back, I sometimes think my early career wasn’t measured in promotions or salary increases.

It was measured in addresses.

Some people spend their youth climbing the property ladder.

We spent ours sprinting from one rung to the next while volcanoes, burglars, party lines and toddlers all did their best to keep life interesting.

1979-2026

Son Nathan

The scenic route

Nathan – The Scenic Route

Oliver arrived because we were young, optimistic and apparently had a plan.

Nathan? Nathan was an afterthought.

Ione decided Oliver needed a playmate, and on my birthday I was home in Lae, head buried in my final Chartered Accountancy exams—final meaning the last exams I would ever have to sit. While I was wrestling with accounting standards, another rather more important decision was made.

On 2 February 1979, the future CEO of the company was born.

His early career, however, didn't exactly scream "corner office."

At kindergarten, Marion Millard famously found him alone in the sandpit after all the other children had gone inside. A promising start. Later, Ian Smith banished him outside the classroom for two days. Our educational solution? Naturally, we sent him to Canada to a Bahá'í boarding school. When they eventually said, "There's probably no point continuing his studies here," we reluctantly accepted defeat.

What nobody recognised back then was ADHD.

Years later, Nathan recognised it in his own daughter, which in turn led to his own diagnosis. Suddenly, decades of sandpits, classrooms and puzzled teachers made perfect sense.

His educational résumé therefore reads something like this:

Sandpit → Canada → Honduras → MBA.

Most universities don't advertise that pathway.

In despair—or perhaps inspiration—we sent him to volunteer in Honduras. That turned out to be one of life's magnificent detours. He found his wife there, and now my two beautiful granddaughters chatter away in Spanish while I smile and pretend I know what's going on.

Sometimes life isn't about getting to the destination by the shortest route. Sometimes the scenic route turns out to be the best one.

Today, Nathan and I both live in Port Moresby, almost within shouting distance of each other. We were both supposed to have Starlink installed today. Frankly, we're close enough that we could probably save money and piggyback off a single dish.

And tonight? Black tie. Opera. Company table for ten. The security car picks us both up as though we’re making our grand debut into Port Moresby society.

Who would have guessed?

From forgotten in the sandpit to being collected by a security detail in a tuxedo.

Not bad for a little boy who simply needed someone to remember to bring him inside.

1980-2026

Mioko

Duke of York picnic playground lagoon for Rabaul Kokopo folk

Mioko was always our favourite picnic and camping destination in the Duke of Yorks. It had everything—beautiful beaches, warm water and wonderful people. But for every visitor there seemed to be another twenty onlookers, vendors and well-meaning locals. Privacy was a luxury, and it never quite felt like your own little corner of paradise.

We camped there, stayed aboard yachts and even a large motor cruiser with enough cabins to lose yourself in, but eventually we were looking for somewhere different.

That’s when KBB began offering picnics and camping on Kabakon Island. Uninhabited, apart from the gardeners who came across from the neighbouring island to tend their plots, Kabakon felt like a hidden gem.

It was there that we first met Cory.

There was something immediately familiar about him. His accent, his mannerisms and even his appearance were an uncanny match for a friend of mine of many years who later became family. It was almost unsettling. But Cory was very much his own man—a larger-than-life character with a vision for tourism, an infectious optimism and a “can do” spirit that I admired immensely.

We returned with several Malaysian families for an overnight stay. One enthusiastic guest even packed a full-sized suitcase for a one-night island camping trip, which gave Cory a good laugh.

His people looked after us beautifully. They cooked wonderful meals, shared fresh tropical fruit and made us feel genuinely welcome. Mona was unwell and managed to step on something sharp in the water, but nothing was going to stop her enjoying this little slice of paradise. There were mosquitoes, certainly, but there was also crystal-clear water, warm hospitality and the kind of peace that is becoming increasingly rare.

On the trip home the weather freshened. One family had a baby aboard, and I suggested they return in the larger boat, but everyone pressed on. The sea was rough, yet we all made it back safely.

Those memories have become even more precious now.

Cory devoted himself to sharing the beauty of Kabakon with others. He welcomed strangers as friends and left many of us with memories that will last a lifetime. His recent passing, in such heartbreaking circumstances, has touched people right across the islands.

Rest in peace, Cory. Thank you for your friendship, your generosity and your belief in the beauty of your islands. We will never forget you.

1980-2026

Tour guide

Role reversal

TOUR GUIDE

For many years I have taken visitors around Rabaul, explaining the history, pointing out the sights and marvelling with them at the volcanoes surrounding the place I love.

So, for the first time, I booked myself on a high-end tour of Mount Hagen—and discovered how difficult it is for a tour guide to become a tourist.

As luck would have it, they decided to cut the Kagamuga runway in half just before we arrived. We immediately changed airlines—at some cost, I might add. Apparently “high-end tour” refers not only to the standard of the accommodation but also to the altitude of the invoices.

Three friends were also on the tour by sheer coincidence. My parents had been friends with their parents, and they had a small baby with them who kept Kavi dangerously clucky throughout the trip.

There were twelve tourists, one guide and a hired 25-seater bus, so even our empty seats were travelling in considerable comfort.

Our half-day tour took us through villages around Hagen, where we watched three or four cultural displays. There were dancers, warriors and semi-naked mourning women. Kavi coped bravely with the rather generous display of mammary glands, while I concentrated respectfully on the cultural significance of it all.

We even found a decent café with proper coffee, and I became embarrassingly excited every time we passed one of our red, white and blue service stations. Other tourists photographed the mountains and village life; I photographed fuel pumps.

Craig de Witt then climbed aboard with his charming Siberian Russian wife and the two tourists he was escorting. It was essentially a tour within a tour, rather like discovering a Russian doll inside a Trans Niugini bus.

Bob Bates has seven resorts around PNG, and Rondon Ridge is a beauty. On my previous visit I had come for work, but this time I could properly enjoy the magnificent view over the Wahgi Valley. I also finally worked out which mountain was Mount Hagen. After all these years, the mountain had apparently been there the whole time.

Rooms were desperately short because of the Hagen Show, so we were given one that was not entirely finished. It had walls, beds and most of the other modern conveniences one looks for in a room. The hotel has its own hydro system, but it is

the dry season, so the generator goes off at eleven. This encourages guests to go to sleep early—or at least prevents them from seeing which parts of the room remain unfinished.

We saw a splendid panoply of traditional dances, merely the precursor to tomorrow’s Hagen Show. The hotel was full, and the only way to secure a room was to book the complete tour. There were also quite a few Australians with long PNG connections, too numerous to name without turning this into the Hagen telephone directory.

Our guide made the occasional factual error. I had to bite my tongue and remind myself that I was no longer the guide—I was a paying passenger.

This may have been the hardest cultural discipline of the entire tour.

After decades as the know-it-all Rabaul guide, I had finally become the know-it-all quasi-PNG tourist sitting quietly in the back of the bus.

Well, mostly quietly.

1980-2026

David our lawyer

A special guy

David’s funeral is on Saturday in Christchurch, with the cremation on Monday. No plans for the ashes yet. Knowing David, he’ll probably keep everyone waiting patiently while he reviews the options and suggests a compromise everyone can live with.

When you live in a one-horse town like Rabaul, relationships matter. There was one decent lawyer and one decent accountant, and if you upset either of them you risked becoming a regular customer of the other.

David was there at various chapters of our lives.

My ex-wife was very fond of David. Actually, I don’t know anyone who wasn’t fond of David. He achieved this remarkable feat by practising a strange and radical form of law known as “keeping people out of court.”

Truth be told, David was probably a better mediator than lawyer. Litigation seemed to offend him personally. If two people arrived in his office ready for battle, he’d somehow have them leaving with a handshake, a cup of tea and a payment plan.

When my marriage ended, my ex accepted 40% of our PNG assets on David’s say-so. In legal circles this is known as “the David discount.” Barristers dream of possessing that kind of persuasive power.

Years later, when we adopted our darling PNG daughter Mona, David was there again in Kokopo Court. Mona slept peacefully on my chest throughout the proceedings, blissfully unaware that her future was being decided by a judge, a lawyer and a father trying very hard not to move and wake the baby.

Afterwards we posed for a photograph outside the courthouse. Mona continued sleeping through the celebrations, the legal formalities and probably most of the drive home.

David would have approved. In his experience, sleeping through court proceedings was often the wisest strategy available.

1980

Auction

Drunk customer dud chq

Chapter 1 – Going, Going… Gone Wrong

When I bought my transport and customs business in Rabaul in 1980, one of the unexpected bonuses was becoming the Government Auctioneer for the Islands Region. It wasn't exactly on my childhood career list. I'd dreamt of being a pilot, a millionaire, maybe even a rock star. "Professional seller of other people's misfortunes" hadn't crossed my mind.

It turned out to be a wonderful sideline. It generated a bit of income, introduced me to just about everybody in the province and, every now and then, allowed me to pick up the odd bargain before everyone else realised what they were looking at.

Of course, bargains sometimes came attached to people.

Take Kimbe.

One of my customers arrived magnificently drunk. Experience had already taught me that arguing with a drunk is about as productive as teaching a pig to tap dance. So instead I offered him a drink.

"Without ice," I said.

It broke the ice beautifully.

Another fellow proved rather more difficult.

He was an aspiring politician who believed his personal cheque should be accepted without question. I, on the other hand, believed a bounced cheque wasn't legal tender.

When I politely declined, he grabbed me by the hair.

The next few minutes looked less like a government auction and more like the hundred-metre final at the Olympic Games, with me leading the field around the auction yard and an irate politician in hot pursuit.

The tough expatriates who could normally solve every problem in the world from behind the bar suddenly found the whole spectacle fascinating. They watched from a safe distance, no doubt scoring my evasive manoeuvres.

Thankfully, one man did more than spectate.

Selwyn Krepp bundled me into his car, raced me to the police station, collected a little official reinforcement and, before long, the auction was back underway as though chasing auctioneers was part of the published conditions of sale.

Life has a funny way of rewarding kindness.

Not long afterwards ANZ Bank asked me to auction the contents of a furniture store that had been repossessed. The unfortunate owner happened to be none other than my rescuer, Selwyn.

It was heartbreaking watching him run alongside our trucks as they carried away the furniture he had worked so hard to build his business around. Auctions are strange things. One person’s bargain often begins with another person’s heartbreak.

Then there was Danny Heiden.

Danny didn’t actually bid for much. His preferred hobby was standing in the middle of my auction loudly explaining to everyone why I was doing everything wrong.

Every auctioneer needs someone like Danny.

He gave the buyers free entertainment while I concentrated on selling the merchandise.

As I quickly discovered, being Government Auctioneer wasn’t really about furniture, trucks or machinery.

It was about people.

And people, thankfully, are endlessly entertaining.

Chapter 2 auctions after my walk coffee with the Disgraceville greys

The Bougainville concession

One truck, one Honda and no business plan

The Bougainville Concession

From Alotau, I headed to Lae to see the mighty Mobil about their cartage offer. Amongst other things, I asked Brother Greg — of motorbike fame and, let's be honest, my favourite brother — to ride to Goroka, buy a truck at auction, load the motorbike onto the back and bring the whole circus down to Lae. This was the 1980s PNG entrepreneurial model:

1 truck. 1 Honda. 0 business plan software. 100% confidence.

I already had a truck licence. "Licence" might be stretching it. In Rabaul the police looked at me, looked at the form, and apparently decided anyone silly enough to want to drive a truck voluntarily was qualified. No tests. Just scribbled out a licence and sent me on my merry and uninsured way.

At Mobil, Bob Gleason was the bloke to see. "Bob," I said, "I can't make Bougainville cartage work on cartage alone. I really need to sell fuel too, otherwise I can't cover the cost of an expatriate manager." "Okay," he said. Just like that.

No committee. No Zoom meeting. No 47-page compliance document. No "We'll circle back".

PNG business at its glorious peak. So suddenly I had Bougainville. I am now the biggest fuel distributor in PNG, which proves that occasionally blind panic and opportunism are a legitimate business strategy.

The other reason I was in Lae was for the Bahá'í annual convention at Two Mile. I got elected chairman again — clearly the others had not yet learnt from previous mistakes. At the convention one of my co-religionists was looking for work. I said, "Mate, I've got a job for you."

First though, I needed finance for a new fuel truck. No computers in those days. I took two giant 24-column accounting spreadsheets, sticky-taped them together like a Cold War military map and pencilled in a three-year cash flow forecast for the new business. I proudly showed it to Dad. He glanced at it for about seven seconds. "You'll do well." That was it.

No praise. No emotional breakthrough. No father-son embrace. Just the PNG equivalent of being knighted. And annoyingly, he was right.

The new manager's name was Baljit. I told him, "We need to give you a more western name." So naturally he became Bill.

We flew together to Kieta and checked in at the shipping office to clear our truck. I mentioned we were looking for accommodation for the manager. “Oh, we’ve got a flat upstairs,” they said. Perfect. Then off we went together to Arawa supermarket to buy pillows, which apparently made us look like Bougainville’s least convincing honeymoon couple.

Earlier we had travelled with the Mobil executives on a budget and shared a room. Next morning Bill casually announced to the two Mobil managers: “Paul sleepwalked into my bed last night.” After that I always paid for separate rooms. To this day I’m not entirely sure whether this was genuine concern or simply Bill’s long-term anti-economising strategy.

We started operating the Mobil depot at Loloho and doubled the volume within a year. I named the company “Kieta Transport,” which was slightly cheeky because the existing Shell carrier was “Bougainville Transport.” I figured a little confusion in PNG business circles might accidentally send some work our way. Marketing, PNG style.

The owner, Francis Seeto, turned out to have family links too — his Mum was from Pinipel Island and related to Mona’s great-great-grandmother. In PNG, eventually everybody is either related, owes each other money, or once shared a room under suspicious circumstances.

Tech 2

Many changes

Tech 2 — HF, VHF and UHF

Running a customs agency in Rabaul, it soon became apparent that one of the great obstacles to efficient commerce was a very simple one: finding your bloody wharf tally clerk.

A ship could be alongside, the cargo could be sitting there, the customer could be demanding his goods, but if your tally clerk had wandered fifty metres down the wharf you might as well have been trying to contact Mars.

Somehow I was persuaded that the answer was UHF radio.

In those early days the business was running on the smell of an oil rag and I could hardly afford an expensive technological mistake. But Mercury was in Gemini when I was born, which I am told explains a certain attraction to communication and gadgets, so UHF it was.

As I remember it, UHF was essentially line-of-sight. That suited us perfectly. I didn’t need to talk to London. I needed to find a bloke standing behind a stack of copra bags at Rabaul wharf.

Then we got into shipping and suddenly I had to learn about HF.

HF was altogether more mysterious. You fired your signal into the heavens, bounced it off the ionosphere and, with a little luck, somebody hundreds or thousands of kilometres away heard you. It seemed less like telecommunications and more like witchcraft sanctioned by the Post and Telegraph Department.

As we moved into fuel, radios became part of the company culture. Every truck had one. Every depot had one. Everyone had a call sign. Before long half my life seemed to consist of saying “Roger” to people I could actually see.

When the tall ships occasionally came into Rabaul harbour, I had several marine channels programmed into my car radio. This may or may not have been entirely legal, but Rabaul in those days was not burdened by an excessive devotion to regulatory theology.

If I wanted to invite the captain to dinner, I would call the ship on Channel 16.

“Islands Petroleum calling…”

Once contact was made, we would switch to another channel for the actual invitation. Channel 16 was the international calling and distress frequency and probably not the place to announce:

“Drinks at six. Dinner seven. Bring anyone interesting.”

The fishermen had their own system. Marine Channel 84 operated through a repeater, so boats could call in their catches from well offshore.

Naturally, that had to go into my car as well.

There was something deeply satisfying about driving through Kokopo and hearing:

“Two yellowfin, one wahoo, lost a marlin.”

It was the original social media, except everybody had fish.

John Millard was our resident radio wizard — and still is. When the volcano erupted in 1994 and normal communications began collapsing around us, John performed some Promethean electronic magic and opened up channels so that people with otherwise incompatible radios could suddenly talk to each other.

For a town being buried in ash, communications were rather important.

One of the most memorable call signs was “November One”, New Britain Quarries. Their boss, the incomparable earthmover man Steve Day, found himself cut off by one of the enormous washouts and came on the radio requesting extraction.

There was something wonderfully understated about hearing a man surrounded by volcanic devastation calmly asking whether somebody might perhaps come and rescue him.

Telecom then introduced pagers.

Ione and I had pagers and, naturally, developed our own codes.

Some meant perfectly respectable things such as:

“Come home for a cup of tea.”

Others did not.

I will leave it there in the interests of family history.

Out at sea, HF could also perform another miracle. You called Radio Rabaul, gave the operator a telephone number and they patched your radio call into the landline network.

Suddenly you could be sitting on a boat somewhere off New Ireland talking to somebody’s office telephone.

It reminded me of Goroka in 1965, when the telephone exchange still had an operator physically plugging your call into the right hole. Technology had advanced enormously, yet somehow there was still a person in the middle saying:

“Go ahead, caller.”

John Millard, of course, went one better.

He devised a VHF system that allowed you to obtain a telephone line directly from the radio in your vehicle. You pressed the microphone, got a line and dialled the number from the handset.

We had effectively invented the mobile telephone.

Telikom was not nearly as impressed with this breakthrough as we were and eventually put a stop to it.

Probably just in time, because real mobile phones were arriving.

Then everything accelerated.

Email.

The internet.

Web pages.

Digicel.

Mobile phones spread through Papua New Guinea with extraordinary speed. Before long your haus meri had a smartphone and was quite possibly better at using it than you were.

And now, in my seventies, I can go diving in Bootless Bay with John Miller, the dive master, and my Apple Watch Ultra becomes my dive computer.

I come back to my apartment complex in Port Moresby and the building now has fibre-optic internet, carrying almost unimaginable amounts of information as pulses of light through strands of glass.

From bouncing HF radio waves off the ionosphere to sending billions of bits of information down a hair-thin piece of glass.

All in one lifetime.

But perhaps the most interesting technological revolution in PNG has not been the equipment.

It has been the people.

Years ago spare cash disappeared into cigarettes, betel nut and the occasional beer.

Increasingly, it disappears into mobile-phone top-ups.

People who never had a bank account now transfer money by phone. Families communicate instantly between villages and cities. Market prices, school fees, funeral contributions and airline bookings travel through a handset that would have looked like science fiction when I was standing on Rabaul wharf wondering where my tally clerk had gone.

Mobile money has not yet transformed PNG to the extent it has parts of Africa.

But it will.

And somewhere in Papua New Guinea today there is probably a haus meri with a smartphone, mobile banking, Facebook, WhatsApp and better internet skills than her employer.

Which seems to me an entirely appropriate conclusion to fifty years of technological progress.

The tally clerk, however, is probably still missing.

Photo Tony Saunders my CEO son just found him, bought my business from the founder Rod Hancock in 1963 and on good terms which got repeated for me 20 years later
He also coined the name Gazelle Agencies, I must ask him how he got in touch with his tally clerks.

Brother Bruce Saunders Honiara fame dancing with Keithie Us Consul Honiara another islands family

1980-2023

Helen’s passing

Helen got her car back

Elena Yaganegi — our indomitable Aunty Helen
19 August 1942 – 18 July 2023

When I bought my business in Rabaul in 1980, Elena was the part-time accountant. I promptly made her full-time and added the clerical duties previously handled by the owner. Nothing says “welcome to the new management” quite like more work!

Before long, she and Habib had their own business and a new car. That car would later have an adventure worthy of a Hollywood script—although finding anyone willing to believe the script might have been difficult.

On the night before the Rabaul volcano erupted, my family and I, along with about fifty of their friends, sheltered at their Nonga home, “Palawat Vuvumadiring”. By morning, the volcano had erupted, and it was time to go. We left three two-wheel-drive cars behind and formed a convoy of bigger vehicles to get everyone out.

Then began the extraordinary travelling circus of their abandoned car.

First, it was stolen. The Defence Force recovered it at a checkpoint. The police then took it from the Defence Force, after which a policeman took it home. Apparently, everyone liked the car. Ownership seemed to be the only detail nobody worried about.

Somehow, I managed to recover it, along with two of my own cars.

By then, Habib and Helen had moved to Goroka and were trying to rebuild their mail-order video business. Without their car, they were walking everywhere—not much fun for Habib, who had a crook knee.

I shipped their car to Lae, thinking the worst was over. Silly me.

AGC, the finance company, repossessed it straight off the wharf. There were arrears to sort out, but a debt involving a related company was also muddying the waters. After a tense exchange and some overdue payments settled, the car was released. To my accountant’s eye, it had looked suspiciously like an attempted theft in a collar and tie.

The volcano, thieves, soldiers, police and finance company had all had their turn. Now it was finally ours to deliver.

My then-wife drove my car, while I drove theirs from Lae up to Goroka. At last, we returned it to Helen and Habib. Rarely has handing over a set of car keys felt like such a victory.

That was just one story from their forty-six years in Papua New Guinea—a life full of friendship, upheaval, enterprise and the determination to keep going.

Yesterday, we lost Aunty Helen in Alotau. She was a kind, happy and indomitable soul, remembered with deep affection by those whose lives she touched.

Her funeral in Alotau is on Tuesday, and Kavitha and I are trying to attend.

The Bahá’í community of Papua New Guinea will sorely miss her. So will we.

Farewell, Aunty Helen. Whenever I think of you, I will remember the warmth of your home, your generous spirit—and one very troublesome car.

1980

Mum as a travel teacher

Mums visit to afore

A visit to the Managalas

In Papua, attending a Convention isn't always easy

By MARGARET BLUETT

The Managalas live in the Afore sub-province of the Northern Province of Papua, an island group in Australasia. The story of these people and the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith among them is quite interesting.

The Managalas belong to the same language group as the people in Mountain Brown where there are many Bahá'í villages. In 1976 two Bahá'ís from Mountain Brown, Wili Amana and Beporo, spent six weeks in Afore teaching the people about the Faith. From there they traveled to Lae, the capital of Papua and site of the National Bahá'í Center, carrying with them about 460 declaration cards—the village people had responded warmly to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh.

Following their visit, other Bahá'ís went to the area including Sue Podger, John Capo, Sirus Naraqi and Erena Ari. The people began to build local Bahá'í Centers in about six villages.

These activities aroused the attention of the local churches, and verbal attacks on the Bahá'ís began. They were accused of stirring up trouble, and complaints against them were made eventually to the government. A government official, following an investigation of the complaints, told David Podger by phone that as far as he was concerned, the troubles were being caused by others, not the Bahá'ís, and that would be the essence of his report to the government.

The problems did not cease immediately. Threats against the Bahá'ís continued, until finally one of the strongest Bahá'ís in the area, a member of the local Government Council, was murdered, ostensibly in an argument over a pig. This unfortunate incident, while disquieting, did serve to end the agitation against the Bahá'ís.

Last December, two Bahá'ís from New Zealand, W. Parkinson and B. Plowman, spent some time in the area. Apparently through their efforts at the Afore district headquarters, holding a public meeting and explaining the Bahá'í Teachings in English to the officials, everyone in the area, including those who were opposed to the Faith, now understands what it represents, and the hostility has subsided.

That is the situation Michael Homerang and I found when we visited Afore in April. We went there to assist the delegates to travel to the National Convention and to remind the villagers of the upcoming elections of Local Spiritual Assemblies.

The delegates from that area hadn't attended the Convention the previous year, and it was thought they might not be able to come again without help. I flew our family's little plane to Popondetta, where Michael was waiting for me. He had spent a few days in Popondetta with his brother-in-law, Cedric Kunak, and his family. Cedric, who like Michael is from New Ireland, is a devoted believer; he and his family look after all the Bahá'í teachers who have been trooping through town for the past few years. At Riḍván, Cedric was one of those elected to the National Spiritual Assembly.

Arriving at the airstrip in Popondetta, Michael and I were told that the airstrip at Afore was closed because of long grass. We decided to return to Popondetta township and try to find a vehicle going to Afore overland. This proved fruitless, and we sat for two days in a park waiting for vehicles to Afore to appear.

It was an interesting experience, as many people came to us and asked courteously what we were doing there. It must have been a rather strange sight to them, this dark man from New Ireland and a white woman waiting together for a passenger vehicle. Several people invited us to stay with them if we had nowhere else to sleep.

An interesting fact emerged from these conversations, and that is that everyone knew about and respected the Bahá'í Faith. The visit of a teaching team of black American Bahá'ís for a week in 1979 was mentioned by several people.

By Monday morning I was getting desperate, as time was running out if we were to reach Afore and accomplish what we had planned. At length we spoke to a pilot who suggested that we fly to another airstrip at Sila, which was five miles from Afore, and walk the rest of the way. It sounded like a good idea, and soon we were on our way above the towering mountain range between Popondetta and Afore.

Landing at the Sila airstrip was a unique experience. The strip ran up the side of a mountain at a nine per cent slope, was covered with grass and quite bumpy. There were no buildings in the area, but a few village people were there, hoping to board the plane. We could see Afore in the distance, an open area of grass, but ahead of us lay a hilly terrain that took four hours to cross, walking through rivers, rain forest, hills and gardens, then across grassy slopes to the Afore Station.

Arriving at the small cluster of houses, we wondered what to do next. Night was coming, and our feet were tired and sore. Then a man came up to us and said, "Can I help you?" After hearing that we were Bahá'ís, he said, "I'll get some boys to show you where the Bahá'ís sleep." We walked with them down through the houses to the bottom of a hill where a small village was nestled among the trees.

By this time I was ready to drop from exhaustion. We asked for the Bahá'ís, to which a very cheerful fellow replied, "We are all Bahá'ís here." What a relief.

The little village was so peaceful, its tiny wooden houses on stilts looking toward a deep mist-shrouded valley partially surrounded by food gardens, rain forest and a clear, cool and fragrant mountain stream. After resting, eating and talking to the villagers, we found where the delegates were, and decided which villages we could

visit in the next two days, leaving another two days for traveling to Sogeri for the National Convention.

In the morning we walked to Manusi and found Ipipi Nameri, a Bahá'í who had been in Lae for a conference. He explained to us something about the way the people in Afore are living. Most of the villages, he said, have been abandoned to the old, the sick, and the children, because those who are able to work have gone into the forest, growing and picking cardamon, which has become the most important crop in that area. This means that the former Bahá'í Centers are neglected, and the places where Assemblies were are gone, replaced by new villages in the forest.

We walked to Bua where we found the Center neglected, as the men are away from the village. Learning that two of the delegates were nearby, we sent them a message to come to Bua. Meanwhile, we relaxed in the village, washed in a stream, and talked to the people who were there. We were told that the reason we hadn't been able to get a vehicle going into the area was because the only road in was closed by a landslide.

No vehicles were moving in the area at all, and I began to worry that we wouldn't get out with the delegates in time to reach the Convention at Sogeri. By the next morning, however, we had found the delegates, asked them to prepare to leave for Sogeri early Thursday, and said we would pray for a vehicle to arrive, as there was no plane to Sila either that day or the next.

The following day we returned to the Afore Station to ask at the post office whether the delegates' air tickets to Sogeri had arrived. No one had thought to go and look for them. We arrived at the Station at noon. It was steaming hot, and we had huge blisters on our feet from walking. But, thank God, the tickets were at the post office.

As we were leaving, a man called to us from a large building nearby: "I want to ask you two some questions."

Wondering what it could be he wanted, we climbed the steps into his house and were seated.

"I have just completed Lesson 1 of the Bahá'í correspondence course," he told us, "and want to know if my answers are correct."

I asked how he knew we were Bahá'ís. He replied that Bahá'í teachers are the only people who ever walk in there—I think he meant the only foreigners.

Returning to the village of Ogan for the night, we helped the villagers elect their Local Spiritual Assembly. In the clear stillness of the night we heard the sound of a vehicle in the direction of the Afore Station. Luckily, it was returning to Popondetta, and the next morning we managed a ride, picking the delegates up along the road. The small truck was jammed full of passengers as it ran jauntily down the winding roads and across a flooded river.

At one point the wet brakes failed, the truck went into a ditch, and everyone fell out. Fortunately, no one was hurt, though the accident certainly added an element of excitement to the trip.

We boarded our plane at Siva, and reached Popondetta in time to collect Cedric and another delegate and catch the plane for Moresby in time to arrive for the Convention. The delegates promised they would help with the election of the remaining Local Spiritual Assemblies in their villages upon their return from the Convention.

Bahá'í News, August 1980, pages 7–9.

1980

Trip by mum to afore in dads plane

Shorter version

A Visit to the Managalas

By Margaret Bluett, adapted with a little help from Paul

In April 1980, Michael Homerang and I set out for Afore in Papua's Northern Province. We had people to find, villages to visit and a deadline to meet. What we didn't have was the slightest idea how difficult it would be to get there, or indeed back again.

My husband Noel flew our family's little plane to Popondetta, where Michael was waiting for me. We were promptly told that the airstrip at Afore was closed because the grass was too long.

That seemed a minor setback. We would simply find a vehicle and travel overland.

Two days later, we were still sitting in a park in Popondetta, waiting for a vehicle to Afore to appear. Several people came over to ask, very politely, what we were doing. It must have been an unusual sight: a man from New Ireland and a white woman sitting together in a park, apparently waiting for a bus that had forgotten it was supposed to exist.

Some kindly offered us a place to sleep. We were grateful, but what we really needed was a vehicle with a driver and a road.

By Monday morning, time was running out and my optimism was looking distinctly weather-beaten. Then a pilot suggested we fly to Sila, about five miles from Afore, and walk the rest of the way.

Five miles! That didn't sound too bad. Mind you, he hadn't mentioned exactly what stood between those two points.

Soon we were flying over the towering mountain range between Popondetta and Afore. Landing at Sila was an experience in itself. The grass airstrip ran up the side of a mountain on a nine per cent slope and was distinctly bumpy. There were no buildings, although a few villagers were waiting in the hope of catching a plane.

We could see Afore in the distance. It looked close enough.

Four hours later, after walking through rivers, rainforest, hills, gardens and grassy slopes, we arrived at Afore Station. My feet had formed a very different opinion of the phrase "five miles".

Night was coming, we were tired and sore, and we weren’t quite sure where to go. A helpful man arranged for some boys to show us down the hill to a small village. By the time we arrived, I was ready to drop.

Fortunately, we were warmly welcomed. The village was peaceful, with little wooden houses on stilts looking towards a misty valley, surrounded by gardens and rainforest, with a clear mountain stream nearby.

After a rest, something to eat and conversations with the villagers, we worked out where to find the people we had come to collect and which villages we could reach over the next two days.

The following morning we walked to Manusi, where Ipipi Nameri explained that many people had moved into the forest to grow and pick cardamom. New settlements had sprung up, while older villages were occupied mainly by those who had stayed behind.

We walked on to Bua, sent word to two of the people we were looking for, washed in a stream and talked with the villagers.

There we finally learned why no vehicle had appeared in Popondetta. The only road into the area had been closed by a landslide.

Our two days in the park had not been the result of a faulty timetable. There was no traffic.

I began to worry about getting everyone out again. There was no plane to Sila that day or the next, and our deadline was approaching. We found the people we needed, asked them to be ready early on Thursday and hoped that somehow a vehicle would arrive.

The next day we returned to Afore Station to ask whether the air tickets had arrived at the post office. By noon the heat was steaming and our feet were decorated with enormous blisters. Fortunately, the tickets were there. Nobody had thought to collect them.

That evening, back at Ogan, we heard a vehicle in the clear stillness of the night. It was returning to Popondetta, and the next morning we managed to secure a ride, collecting our passengers along the way.

The small truck was soon packed full and made its cheerful way down the winding roads and across a flooded river.

Unfortunately, the brakes did not appreciate their swim.

They failed, the truck went into a ditch and everyone fell out. Thankfully, nobody was hurt, although it added an unexpected bit of excitement to a journey that had already supplied quite enough.

We eventually boarded our plane at Sila, reached Popondetta, collected Cedric and another passenger, and caught the plane to Port Moresby in time.

We had travelled by plane, on foot and by truck, crossed rivers, acquired blisters, spent two days waiting for a vehicle that couldn’t get through and briefly disembarked from a truck without using the door.

But we made it.

1980

Baha’is in the 80,s

Mums story

The Eighties – a New Direction

Chapter Six

A new direction does not imply a change in the mission statement it can mean a new approach to the same issues caused by an influx of new people. The pioneers who began to arrive in the eighties were coming from different locations, not so many from Australia, New Zealand, or the U.S.A. but Iran, Malaysia, and India. Believers in those countries had experienced mass teaching and were comfortable with rapid expansion of numbers aided by the addition of permanent travel teachers who received subsistence wages and expenses from the funds of the Faith. Consequently, it was decided to recruit potential travel teachers from Malaysia available for periods longer than a few weeks to reside in remote places. They were a valuable asset in approaching fertile places for mass teaching or areas that needed deepening assistance.

Other pioneers arrived who found work in Moresby which now had more pioneers than other centres, a contrast to the early days of the Faith when Rabaul and Lae had the most pioneers. The Sturdivant’s returned to the U.S.A. as did the Himes and the Eastern Highlands believers were left without support for a few years.

A new pioneer from the United States, a chiropractor, arrived in Lae and decided there were enough pioneers in the town and wanted to go somewhere he was needed. I suggested he move to Goroka. Full of the spirit but quite nervous about the idea he set forth. On arrival and following directions, I had given him he drove his little Suzuki car along the Bena Road and parked it beside the turn off to the village of Arufa. He didn’t like to risk his new vehicle on the narrow steep track and bravely decided to walk between head high kunai grass into the unexpected. After going some distance, he was startled when a village man walked out of the kunai in front of him. The man was wearing a wall decoration around his neck, a wooden plaque with the following words inscribed on it “Baha’u’llah Has Come”. Dr. Johnson shook the man’s hand and told me later that he thought to himself,

‘Praise God the natives have the Message. I can go back to Lae.’

On making inquiries later with Wanume, the man who walked out of the kunai grass, I asked him why he was wearing that plaque and he told me this story. It was a Sunday morning and his three wives were getting ready to attend the new Lutheran Mission Church nearby. He told them ‘well you can go but I am still a Baha’i’. Then he pulled the decoration from the wall of the family hut put it around his neck and walked down the hill through the grass and when he emerged he confronted Dr. Johnson. The Doctor’s response shows, I feel, it is not easy to be a pioneer in the Highlands.

Fortunately, in the early eighties Goroka acquired new pioneers Padma and Wing

Wong from Malaysia, Craig and Gail Volker from the United States, Roger, and Sue Hancock from New Zealand and two other Americans, I can't remember their names because they didn't stay for long enough for me to know them. These friends helped the growth of the Faith in the area and enrolled some students, educated believers able to read the writings themselves thus relieving the difficulty of deepening illiterate believers in the teachings. Unfortunately, the new pioneers found the village of Arufa engrossed in other activities such as playing cards and no one in the village appeared to be interested in resuming Baha'i activities. They had been left without contact for too long. We didn't have the deepening materials available those days, suited to village life, such as the Ruhi books or the material that goes with them. I remember Leila Heard saying to me when the book by Ruhiyyih Khanum a Manual for Pioneers was published, "We did our best, you and me, without anything like this".

Friends in Goroka in the Eighties –
L to R. Agnes Vera, Wing Wong, Lopena Vera, Padma Wong

With so many new pioneers arriving the character of the communities in urban centres felt different to the early years when a handful of pioneers assisted each other, staying in each other's homes, and connecting by phone or mail on a regular basis. Our Baha'i family had grown and due to the rising cost of air travel, caused by the sudden increase of the cost of oil, pioneers tended to stay at home and associate mostly with the friends in the same locality. However, the building of the Shiraz Institute allowed for nine day Institutes for up to fifty people, a process which became popular in that period. These events in addition to Conventions provided a place where the friends could be deepened in the writings. So, a new stage in the development occurred; after attending an Institute local believers began to deepen each other. The Institutes created opportunities for love, unity, and close friendships between people from different areas of the country to develop, as well as inspirational experiences that encouraged them to go home and teach with new knowledge and a new spirit. The Institutes were lively and the attendants loved the social sections where there was a lot of music, singing and dancing.

The Shiraz Institute building inspired the National Assembly to use the first house as a residence for the caretakers whose family was growing and the National Assembly office. They divided the big room, which the NSA previously added to the old house, into five spaces, an entrance, and an office for the National Assembly, an office for the Secretary, a book room, and a small lounge. They asked the Lae community to use the hall of the Institute building for all local community events including Feasts and Holy Days.
At the time, which seems rather pathetic now, I missed the loss of the big room we had added to the house. Our Lae events were so comfortable and friendly in the house, the Institute hall felt so utilitarian with basic furnishings and acoustics more suited to large gatherings. In time, of course such a shift was necessary but changes are like that, they require a change in our comfort zones.

The Revolution in Iran brought some new pioneers to PNG who were refugees. Iraj Zabetzadeh, his wife Fafa and her two sisters, who fled persecution in Shiraz arrived unexpectedly in Lae in 1981. An angry mob burnt down their house in Shiraz and they left their home in Iran with only the clothes they wore and the money in their bank accounts which was luckily still accessible. On leaving Iran they flew to the Philippines where they stayed for a period until their funds were diminishing and then flew to PNG using their last savings. Iran and Fafa stayed with us and the two girls stayed with the Leongs. After a few months, the sisters decided to return home but Iran and Fafa stayed on. They lived in the old centre in Swallow Road and Iraj worked for our company Anisa. We were so grateful to have them in the community; their English was limited but they soon learned to communicate and had their first child, Golly in Lae. After a few years, they migrated to Australia, prospered, and now live in Geelong immersed in the local community.

I don’t remember how many pioneers there were in Moresby in the eighties as people seemed to come and go and I didn’t get to know them all but I remember Derek and Tulua Smith arrived in 1983. The two Papuan members of the NSA I do remember due to their years of service on the Assembly; were Erama Ugaia and Oppsy Kora. The community in Rabaul had eight pioneers, Ruhi and John Mills and their children, Habib, and Helen Yaganegi and their children, Paul, and Ione Bluett and their children and by this time Rodney Hancock had moved to Kimbe.
The statistics on Assemblies were two on Baluan Is. in Manus, Madina and Lauapul in New Ireland, eight in the Siane, four in Asaro, one in Goroka and one in Arufa, two in Mt. Hagen, I can’t remember how many there were in and around Moresby, a few assemblies in Mountain Brown, Kwikila, and Afore and seven in the Gulf. Most of these areas had pioneers living within travelling distance but the Gulf was too remote they needed visitors.

I was relieved of my duties as Secretary of the National Assembly in 1982 and became a member of a new National Teaching Committee. We were uncertain about how to organise a body like that, we didn’t have any guidelines or funding I thought maybe one way we could start was by establishing Teaching Committees in remote areas of literate friends who could write to the NTC. I decided to visit the Gulf Province first as we hadn’t heard anything from the villages there for a few years after the Podgers left. I only knew the names of some villages on the river through the delegates I met at Conventions and hoped to find some young people in those villages who were literate. The youth were most likely the only ones who had attended either Mission or Government schools.
One version of that visit to the Gulf is printed in ‘Birds into Paradise’ and I am sorry I didn’t take a camera with me as so many changes have occurred in the decades since then. In hindsight in those days before the appearance of mobile phones and computer driven social networks, we rarely considered when living our everyday lives, we were making history. We often only remembered to take photos on ceremonial occasions.
When my husband received his pilot’s licence I was brave or foolish enough to allow him to fly me to Baimuru in 1980 and leave me there for a couple of weeks. I didn’t

know anybody in Baimuru or have any idea what I would find. It was the first time I had taken a teaching journey without a local believer accompanying me, but I didn't have access to anyone familiar with the region.
The airstrip in Baimuru consisted mainly of mud covered with sawdust and gravel, but luckily the day we arrived it was sunny and Noel could land our plane on hard ground without skidding, which happened after a period of heavy rain when he came to collect me two weeks later, the planes wheels became skis as it slid along the wet ground.
In Baimuru we found a small settlement on the edge of the river; with a trade store, a timber mill, a market, and a couple of expatriate houses, one of which was occupied by the Manager of the Mill. The lady welcomed me warmly as the only other expatriate woman she had seen for some time. I told her my plan to visit villages and she made some helpful suggestions and introduced me to a Swiss engineer planning a trip up the river the same afternoon, he said he knew the village of Ara'ava, on his route, and he was happy to take me with him.
When we arrived at Ara'ava on a tributary of the main river I was shocked to discover the village was situated on the edge of a cliff about four metres above the water far above my head and no way for me to access the flat ground. But my guide familiar with the area sang out to the people looking at us from above, and two men skimmed down a greasy pole which protruded from the bank and rested in the river base. The men pushed me up the pole, not a dignified way to arrive unannounced in the village in the late afternoon with night fast approaching. I managed to locate one of the believers whose name I remembered and he took me to his house where I was made welcome and shared dinner with him and his family. It was a simple meal of sago flour cakes rolled in coconut and sweet black tea. I was rather tired and didn't want to go into details about the reason for being there just told them I wanted to visit them as I knew no pioneers had been there for 'long taim'. The local men who had done the initial teaching in the area were competent speakers due to their experiences in Moresby, but they didn't live along the river where Ara'ava was located and I didn't want to give the impression I didn't respect their ability to be Baha'is despite the lack of resources. I told them I wasn't there to preach to them but on a 'getting to know you' type of exercise.
I brought a tape recorder with me and the youth were fascinated when I played back their own voices. After some consultation with the friends we appointed a teaching committee of young people who promised to write to the National office. The next problem, raised tactfully, was about food. The friends were very poor and their diet inadequate, they lived on sago flour, some coconut and fish or crabs when they could find them but the fishing was difficult at that time because their river was low and muddy. They were embarrassed about how to feed a visitor so I suggested if someone in the village had a boat with an outboard motor some of us could return to Baimuru and buy food at the market. The Principal of the school, although not a Baha'i, had a motor and was happy to take me shopping if I bought the fuel. The friends reassured me the man knew what he was doing and we set off.
Unfortunately, on the way back from the market the motor broke down and there was no spare pin to replace the broken one and only one oar in the boat.
I began praying as we drifted down river in a strong current worried we were going

to be heading into the sea and lost forever. Luckily the boat drifted towards the mangroves and we pulled ourselves along on the roots sticking out of the water into a less dangerous tributary. We finally arrived at a village about two o'clock in the morning. There was a young man there with a small boat with a motor who volunteered to take us back to Ara'ava. He seemed to know more about his boat than the owner of ours so I hired him for the period I was there and had no more troubles with travelling on the rivers. The friends in Ara'ava were relieved to see us finally arrive and happy with all the supplies we purchased. Bidding them all a fond farewell that same day I set off with my new boat man to find Ikinu, a big village closer to the coast. I remembered a couple of the friends there including the big man of the village, rich in village terms with a large house and four wives. He was very concerned about his multiple wives because Counsellor Hoehnke told him at a Convention he should have only one wife but I reassured him that as he had acquired them before he became a believer it would be wrong to send them away. Ikinu appeared to be more prosperous than Ara'ava, their land was plentiful, the fishing was better and more coconut trees to harvest. But it didn't have a school so when the young ones were old enough, if the parents could raise the money, they were sent to Moresby where there was a Gulf community living in a settlement. The daughter of the big man spoke good English and I learnt from her about their lives, she also acted as my translator for the benefit of everyone because they didn't use pidgin, only their own language and Motu.
About a hundred-people gathered together in the big house that night to hear me speak or maybe just because I was there, white ladies rarely came down the river to see them, only Sue Podgier had been there before me. I was tested to my speaking limits, even for someone who is not usually at a loss for words. That night I had to keep thinking of things to tell them, hoping I could inspire them somehow. It wasn't easy because I was sitting close to the light of a kerosene lamp while most of them were in darkness. I was speaking to an audience I couldn't see. They must have enjoyed a visitor because they didn't leave until dawn and kept insisting I keep talking. We ask to be tested, that was my extreme example.

In the eighties, many places needed a visitor to help elect Local Assemblies and supervise delegate elections. Afore in Papua had seven villages with Assemblies but we hadn't heard from them for several years. The National Convention was held in Sogeri in 1981 so I decided to visit Afore en-route to Convention to help with elections and collect delegates and asked Michael Homerang also a member of the Assembly to accompany me. Noel suggested he fly us into Sule because the Afore airstrip was closed. We didn't know then it was about fifteen miles from Afore, it looked closer on the map. We had a long walk ahead of us after Noel left us and flew off before the weather closed in.

Margaret and Homerang with Noel's plane on the Sule airstrip.

We walked along the dirt track to Afore and arrived in the station in the late afternoon and observed the airstrip was covered with four feet high grass. That's when we realised why it was closed and our plane was unable to land in the Station. It hadn't been mowed for months, we learned later the machine had broken down

and there were no spare parts to fix it. In addition, the road to Popondetta on the coast was frequently blocked by landslides caused by constant heavy rain common in the mountains, consequently mail was not getting through to the station.
There were several Government buildings near the airstrip, one with a flagpole in the front, and when a man called out to us from one of the houses I was nervous maybe we were trespassing or needed a permit to be there. As we walked on to the verandah of the building where he sat much to my surprise he greeted us with, 'You are Baha'is I presume'.
When I asked him why he thought that he said, 'A European lady would not be walking around with a local man unless she was a Baha'i'. I took that as a compliment for the Faith. We weren't trespassing thankfully, he was working on the correspondence course the National Assembly was publishing in the Post Courier, the national newspaper, which was a welcome surprise. The course designed by David Podger attracted a lot of interest from readers all over the country. After some discussion about the Faith this man the OIC (officer in charge) informed us the Baha'is in the station decided to build a new village farther down the valley. He said the people named it Ogani and pointed it out to us. I neglected to ask the people what the name meant but it is easier to think of good questions in hindsight.
I was too tired to talk about elections that night but the friends were very happy to see us and next morning we did all the necessary paper work and for another year Ogani had an Assembly and a delegate. With one of the friends we set off to walk to the other villages in the area and it took us a couple of days to see them all and it was reassuring to find most of them had already done their elections. So, we collected the six delegates and went back to Ogani. I was very worried as to how I would get them all to Popondetta as the friends told me no vehicles had been in the station for several weeks due to landslides – road maintenance in remote areas was not a priority.
I felt extreme sympathy for the people of Afore, they had so many problems including being short of food but they were amazingly cheerful despite their difficulties. One man whose house was close to the track we were walking along sang out to us saying, 'It must be Ridvan'. He guessed why we were there, amazing.
After we all returned to Organi that night in the middle of the night I awoke and heard a vehicle, sounds travel long distances in the mountains, so I arose early and hurried to the station to hire the truck and the driver before someone else did.
The driver was agreeable to my suggestion that I hire him and his vehicle to take a car load of people to Popondetta and we agreed on a price. We were all very optimistic as the driver negotiated the truck over the landslide but it tipped over and everyone fell out of the back of the truck into the mud. We arrived in Popondetta looking rather dirty but safe.
Cedric and Doreen Kunak from Madina, lived in the town and they accommodated all of us in their small house for the night, Doreen and I shared the only bed and the men slept on the floor. We hired a PMV to take us to the airport and arrived safely to be collected by Aminio Bale in Moresby who had all the supplies ready for Convention in his truck. On the way to Sogeri it poured rain and I was concerned the bread in the back would get wet, however a tarpaulin kept the bread dry but not all

the delegates so they had another adventure by arriving at the Baha'i property in a soggy state.

Ogani Village near Afore

The National Assembly with Auxiliary Board Members in Sogeri 1981.
L.to R. Michael Bluett, Margaret Bluett, Mehru Mirshahi, Noel Bluett, Padma Wong, David Hall, Henry Enn, Noli Ymana, Aminio Bale, John Gapo, Cedric Kunak and Silan Nadarajah

My holiday from the National Assembly didn't last long next year I was back for a year but this time as Treasurer, Mariette Leong was elected Secretary and our son Michael remained as Chairman. The following year our second son Paul also became a member of the National Assembly and I had another holiday from the National Assembly so didn't attend the International Convention in Haifa in 1983. Our two sons attended and Paul was appointed a teller in the footsteps of his father who had been a teller in the first election in 1963.

For our family, the International Convention in 1983 led to a personal tragedy. Our eldest son Michael passed away in India as he returned home. He was married in 1981 to Kaity Naimi whose family lived in Bombay and they had a small boy a year old. Michael was staying with Kaity's family in Bombay when he died and he is buried in the Baha'i cemetery in that city alongside many prominent believers, mostly from the Parsee community. There is no need to write about the grief we all felt and the tragic loss of a husband and a father for Kaity and Sean and the Chairman of the National Assembly, but that loss cast a shadow over their lives. Noel I could not attend Michael's funeral, he was buried the day after he died, but we did travel to Bombay and bring Kaity and Sean back to Lae to live with us.

Morning Assembly of the Baha'i High School at the National Centre on the Markham Road

While Kaity lived with us an opportunity arose for her to use her training as a teacher. Marsha Milani suggested we start a school for her house meri's children and use the Distant Education facility in Lae for lessons, curriculum, and exam facilities. Kaity became the first teacher, the LSA of Lae supervised it and the community became involved with extracurricular lessons.
The High School thrived and in couple of years we had one hundred and fifty students; a popular Headmaster Paul Ruambil, a believer from the Highlands and another local teacher. The school was self-sufficient as the students paid fees. They added lots of life to the land around the centre and helped develop the gardens.

The students at the school in front of the round house the Wampit believers built with materials they brought from their village.

Margaret and her mother Pauline Letherbarrow in front of the sign decorated by a Sepik believer facing the main road. The sign was a silent teacher for the Baha'i community.

In 1984 I was back on the National Assembly and very happy the school was now in full operation. I loved hearing the students singing the PNG National Anthem in the mornings at Assembly looking very smart in their uniforms. It was an effective development project which involved the friends with prominent people in the Lae community whose children were unable to obtain a place in the Government or Mission schools. They were very pleased to have them attend school with us.

The students had classes in the mornings and in afternoon worked in the gardens improving the property and playing sport – they had a basketball team which entered competitions with other schools.

Summer Schools were held every year in New Ireland, in Madina or Lauapul Village and were always a joyful occasion for the friends who could afford to travel to them. Visitors enjoyed being in New Ireland an especially beautiful region with its proximity to the reef and the huge waves that rolled in from the Pacific.

Summer School in Lauapul Village, New Ireland – 1982. That year a special New year’s celebration was held with singing and dancing and people from other villages attended.

Hand of the Cause Ruhiyyih Khanum arriving in Lae with Violet Nahkjavani and Silan Nadarajah, Rahim Milani some local friends.

. Hand of the Cause Ruhiyyih Khanum visited Lae in 1984. It was a distinct honour to have a visit from the Hand of the Cause. Her interest demonstrated the publicity which we were receiving in the International Baha’i community.

Hand of the Cause Ruhiyyih Khanum with the friends in Lae outside the Shiraz Institute 1984

On the sixteenth of September in 1984 the Baha’i community entered a float in the Annual City Independence Day Parade.

Friends in Sing sing dress on the Baha’i float. Elizabeth from Minj and Mudmen from Asaro.

It expressed the oneness of humanity with a not exactly round model of the planet with believers wearing various costumes to represent different countries around the world. Highland in traditional costume were a colourful addition and the float won first prize as the best float in the Parade.

Lae Community on a Sunday morning in front of the Shiraz Institute 1980s

1984

Jason

Rugby team

We were still at university of Tasmania when the marriage proposal came with a PNG clause attached. The first child arrived “a bit early” according to popular village arithmetic, but later I discovered babies actually take about 38 weeks. Ours arrived 42 weeks after the wedding — entirely respectable in both moral and mathematical terms.

Mind you, getting engaged at 21 and 20 was fairly youthful optimism to begin with. By graduation day my wife was visibly pregnant, so the university photos looked less like a commerce degree ceremony and more like the opening scene of a family sitcom.

We had thoroughly prepared for a girl. We had the name. We had the tiny dresses. We had all the delicate plans.

Then Oliver and family arrived in Lae and immediately enlisted in the Susu Mamas Association before his first birthday. The pink clothes quietly disappeared into storage while we adjusted to life with Boy Number One.

The second child arrived promptly in Lae before my two-year contract was up and before I’d even qualified as a chartered accountant. Priorities were clearly shifting. Dr Terry handled the Angau delivery, but the hospital staff were deeply offended that an outside doctor had been brought in. Before long my wife had three nurses glaring at her, no actual nurses helping her, and I fainted at precisely the moment a husband is expected to look useful.

Our fertility record was beginning to look less like family planning and more like a long-running production line for boys in Papua New Guinea.

By then I desperately wanted a girl. Unfortunately the first two boys held a strategic meeting and decided they required reinforcements. Jason was delivered at Vunapope with a German nun acting as midwife — efficient, calm and probably wondering why this Australian couple kept producing sons like a rugby academy.

Jason needed a companion, naturally, so along came Julian. Another nun delivered him. At this stage even the convent was beginning to suspect we were conducting some kind of unofficial experiment.

By now the whole town of Rabaul was emotionally invested in us finally producing a girl. Complete strangers would stop us in the street offering encouragement, prayers and occasionally unsolicited medical theories.

Then came the final surprise package. No nuns left. Instead a cheerful Kiwi volunteer doctor stepped up to the crease. Surely this was destiny turning.

And, as the ultimate cosmic joke, our fifth boy Eliot was born on April Fool’s Day.

Even the maternity ward laughed.

So I shut down the factory, back wheels were lowered

Or so I thought

I never really liked the name Clara

I hate to say ione

I Hate to Say Ione…

I hate to say Ione means “goodbye”. Shops in Samarai and Alotau used to sell T-shirts claiming that in the Suau language it meant exactly that. Whether linguistically accurate or not, it certainly became part of our family folklore.

Ione desperately wanted a girl. Our family planning strategy was simple: never have more than two children under five at any one time. It sounded wonderfully scientific until life intervened.

Task force gave chase

I Hate to Say Ione…

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Ione desperately wanted a girl. Our family planning strategy was simple: never have more than two children under five at any one time. It sounded wonderfully scientific until life intervened.

Then came 1983.

On 31 October the authorities announced Stage Two Volcano Alert for Rabaul. Ironically, the earthquake that triggered it struck on Ione’s birthday. Happy birthday, dear…

That same day a local politician decided to chase me around the yard. Don’t ask me why—I was too busy running to conduct an interview.

By February 1984 we’d decided discretion was the better part of parenting. Our two youngest were sent to Lae to stay with their grandparents and attend school while we remained in Rabaul.

My father-in-law, a steam train and electric train driver—with all the volume and authority that occupation seemed to require—rang me up and gave me the full locomotive treatment.

“Why are you keeping my daughter in harm’s way?”

Without missing a beat I replied,

“Because we’re trying to make another baby, and it’s a bit difficult from long distance.”

Silence.

For once I’d blown the whistle louder than he had. We had a testy relationship at the best of times, but that ended the discussion rather abruptly.

On 11 November 1984, Jason Joseph Bluett arrived safely at Vunapope. Poor Ione had assembled a third wardrobe of girls’ clothes, and for the third time they were packed away unused. The brothers, however, were absolutely delighted to have another recruit.

Thus began Jason’s lifelong association with Vunapope Maternity Ward.

Naturally, we all agreed he was the best-looking baby so far—only just, of course. He spoke earlier than the others, inherited his father’s irresistible charm (well, someone had to say it), and from day one was fiercely independent.

The following month Ione developed a breast infection. PNG hospitals taught you one important lesson: they’re wonderful places when you need them, but the ideal stay is measured in hours rather than days. The unofficial motto seemed to be: “Get in. Get fixed. Get out.”

Then came Christmas Eve.

I was driving our tiny Corolla to Vunapope with baby Jason and our nanny from Malaguna when a busload of riot police suddenly screeched to a halt in front of us. Doors flew open and dozens of officers sprinted towards our little car with remarkable enthusiasm.

Now, I may not have been brave, but I was quick.

Without waiting to discover whether they wanted directions, donations, or my immediate arrest, I slammed the Corolla into reverse, executed what I still consider my finest high-speed reverse U-turn, and retreated into the darkness.

In my mind, my little Corolla was more than a match for their oversized bus.

I decided discretion was once again the better part of valour.

I’d visit my wife on Christmas Day instead.

1984

Watcher on the ridge

A volcano evacuation rehearsal with marshmallows

Watcher on the Ridge

1984 and it wasn’t Big Brother who was watching us. It was Big Volcanologist.

Dystopia had arrived in Rabaul, not in the form George Orwell imagined, but in the form of earthquakes, sulphur fumes and earnest scientists with clipboards. Every week seemed to bring another prediction of imminent doom. The only thing more active than the volcano was the rumour mill.

Our salvation, we reasoned, lay about 80 kilometres away at Put Put Harbour. If the mountain decided to blow its top, we’d be ready.

So, I loaded up the family. Very pregnant wife, two small boys, my brand-new long-wheelbase Isuzu truck, gas bottle, food, water, cooking gear and, if memory serves me correctly, everything except the actual kitchen sink. We headed through the Warangoi River and off towards Put Put for what was essentially a volcano evacuation rehearsal.

One enduring image remains. As we descended a steep mountain section, my wife was trying to hold her bulging stomach against the combined forces of gravity, motherhood and East New Britain road engineering. Every bump threatened to introduce the next child to the world several weeks ahead of schedule.

The Isuzu performed magnificently. The boys thought it was the greatest adventure ever invented. After fording several rivers and bouncing along the coast, we found a beach near Kambubu and set up camp on a plantation whose name I have completely forgotten but whose mosquitoes have never forgotten me.

Concerned about rascals, we rigged a plastic tarpaulin between a few trees and slept on mattresses in the back of the truck. A mosquito net completed the luxury accommodation. Looking back, it resembled a refugee camp designed by someone with absolutely no camping experience.

That evening we lit a fire and roasted marshmallows. The boys were enchanted. To them it was camping. To me it was disaster preparedness with dessert.

For a moment the volcano, the warnings and the uncertainty disappeared. We sat on the beach watching the fire, listening to the waves and pretending we were adventurers rather than nervous residents rehearsing for catastrophe.

When the real eruption came ten years later, the boys were away at boarding school in Canada. But they still remembered that trip. Not the volcanologists, not the warnings, not the earthquakes.

They remembered the truck, the beach, the marshmallows and the feeling that Dad was making it all up as he went along. Which, to be fair, was not entirely inaccurate.

1984

Bag snatcher and pursuit

Holim the call that snags the thief

Holim! Holim!

I was driving a colleague to the PNG–Samoa game today when we came across a little roadside entertainment in Boroko.

A police car stopped in front of us and three policemen jumped out. A shirtless fellow was making his escape through the bush, running uphill—which seemed an unnecessarily ambitious choice under the circumstances.

One policeman ran along the road while the other two followed him up the hill.

“Holim! Holim!” people shouted.

Naturally, I wound down my window and joined in.

“Holim! Holim!”

I had no idea what he’d done, but apparently I’d joined the operation.

It took me straight back to Rabaul, many years ago, when Ione and I were leaving dinner at the Kaivuna Hotel. We were walking the short distance to our car along Sulphur Creek Road when a fellow suddenly snatched her handbag and took off.

My immediate response was calm and practical. Credit cards, money, a few personal things—annoying, certainly, but nobody had been hurt. We could deal with it.

Then Ione issued her assessment.

“GO! GET HIM!”

And so, under instruction—and being a husband who always does what his wife says—I began running.

I must have been in my late twenties or early thirties. I was doing squash and Hash House Harriers and was reasonably fit, although I hadn’t expected an after-dinner fitness assessment.

The fellow had short legs but an excellent turn of speed. To my surprise, I was keeping up. I wasn’t gaining on him, but neither was he getting away.

A respectable performance, I thought, for a man who’d just had dinner.

He headed down Sulphur Creek Road, turned left at the first intersection, then right, with me behind him shouting:

“Holim! Holim!”

Now, “Holim!” is a wonderfully economical alarm. One word, and people understand that somebody needs stopping.

Housemaids and houseboys began appearing ahead of him. His escape route suddenly became rather crowded, so he cut through a yard.

Unfortunately for him, the residents were also out.

Cornered, he pointed confidently in another direction.

“The guy went that way!”

An enterprising attempt, but difficult to sell while standing in somebody else’s backyard with a stolen handbag.

They jumped on him.

I arrived shortly afterwards and joined the proceedings. There was a wrestle, blows were exchanged, and the whole business became considerably more physical than my original plan of cancelling the credit cards.

We called the police and recovered the handbag.

The first—and probably last—time I’ve successfully retrieved stolen property through competitive running.

That night, taking off my shirt, I discovered a bite mark on my back.

He’d bitten me during the struggle, and I hadn’t felt a thing. Adrenaline is remarkable stuff. It can apparently turn off your pain receptors while leaving your sense of athletic achievement fully operational.

I did feel a bit sorry for the little fellow afterwards. He must have been short of money.

But I was rather pleased I’d kept up.

Ione got her handbag back. I got a bite mark and a personal best over an unmeasured distance.

And all these years later, in Boroko, the window went down and it came straight back:

“Holim! Holim!”

1985

Uncle Ron pavey

Fridge man

Dad’s next foray into mergers and acquisitions involved a man called Ron Pavey, refrigeration and air-conditioning wizard, fisherman extraordinaire and about as far removed from the yacht club set as it was possible to get.

While yacht club members debated the finer points of gin and tonic ratios and the merits of twelve-pound line versus fifteen, Ron fished with eighty-pound line and regarded skipjack tuna not as sport but as bulk cargo. He would return with boatloads of fish while everyone else was still congratulating themselves on catching a single mackerel the size of a cigar.

Dad saw potential.

He bought a trade store in Chinatown and combined his two great passions: groceries and frozen goods. It was only natural really. If Dad could have frozen groceries he probably would have refrigerated the entire Highlands.

Every entrepreneur needs a practical bloke to convert dreams into reality and Ron was that man. Married to a Butibam lass and raising a few kids, he was firmly one of our mob. Years later he somehow ended up maintaining air-conditioners at the Bahá’í World Centre in Israel, which is not a career progression guidance counsellors usually mention.

The business traded as RAC Trading. Refrigeration, Air-conditioning and Chinatown all rolled conveniently into one acronym if you squinted hard enough.

Broiler chickens were the big sellers, although government attempts to regulate imported chickens ensured that buying and selling poultry occasionally resembled an international diplomatic incident.

We never made much money from any of these ventures but I suspect this is where I inherited the “Anything for a Buck Bluett” gene.

Most entrepreneurs have people whispering advice in their ears.

Nobody whispered to Dad.

They shouted.

Loudly.

Repeatedly.

Usually with spreadsheets.

To his credit he simply nodded and carried on regardless.

He installed what was reputed to be an excellent computer system and then, because apparently running several marginal businesses wasn’t enough mental stimulation, taught himself to program in C+ in his spare time.

Who does that?

The warehouse on Aircorps Road stored the growing mountain of frozen goods, groceries and assorted ambitions. Dunlop would later buy the site, but at the time it was simply another thread in Dad’s ever-expanding commercial tapestry.

By now the family business structure resembled less a corporate group and more a complicated tapestry of small enterprises held together by optimism, handwritten invoices and Dad’s unwavering belief that the next venture would be the one that made sense of all the others.

Strangely enough, it usually worked just well enough to fund the next idea.

1985

A feud, a warehouse and a workshop

How two feuding landlords paid for my workshop

A Feud, a Warehouse, and a Workshop

Some people remember where they were when they bought their first house. I bought three at once.

One came with the business guru himself, John Mills, still living in it for three months during the handover period. The Grove Street corner house became headquarters for the master.

The second house, on the Kamarere side of Grove Street corner, was for the missus and me. We had two young kids and one wanpela susu who these days happens to be the CEO. Life comes at you quickly.

The third house in Market Street lane belonged to the chief clerk. It was less a property portfolio and more a company organisational chart made of timber and fibro.

John was keen for me to become a customs agent kwik taim. But I already had a customs agent in Habib Yaganegi, a Persian and, by now you know the drill, one of our mob. Habib has since passed away and is buried in Alotau. His wife Elena, a Mexican, became our accounts clerk. We were becoming less a business and more a United Nations field office.

The office itself was a rented tin shed in Market Street. My harp-playing ex-wife looked around and announced she had been hoping for something better. No vision. I saw opportunity. She saw tetanus.

Our truck fleet consisted mainly of run-down relics that we repaired by the side of the road, often while traffic politely drove around us and occasionally offered advice.

We were customs agents with trucks, did personal effects packing and shipping, and generally said yes to anything that might generate a kina. In truth, the real value in the business was those three houses.

The warehouse was rented, but before long the Chinese landlord quadrupled the rent, which struck me as somewhat unfriendly. My solution was to rent the vacant land next door and build a workshop so we could at least get the truck repairs off the street.

Then I discovered something remarkable. I was paying two rents for the same piece of land.

Two Chinese families were involved in a feud of biblical proportions and refused to sign the same piece of paper, acknowledge each other’s existence, or possibly breathe the same air. Aha.

I stopped paying rent on the warehouse and paid only for the land next door, which was considerably cheaper.

Such was the intensity of their feud that there was absolutely nothing they could do about it.

Two birds, one stone.

I got a workshop, saved a fortune in rent and learned an important lesson about commercial property disputes in Papua New Guinea.

Thus, Gazelle Agencies was born and my commercial life was underway.

On a personal note, my two PNG girls finally made it back last night. Air Niugini was delayed out of Rabaul — a sentence so common in PNG that it barely qualifies as news anymore.

They were bumped onto a later Qantas flight and, praise be, there is a God. I actually got to see them before setting off on my road trip with thirteen older mates, a demographic where discussions about fuel economy, blood pressure medication and car tyres now comfortably outrank sport and politics. NSW mostly.

1985-2026

The underwater cure

Harry Mostert's cure for a blocked sinus

The Underwater Cure

When I first arrived in Rabaul, the Pearl of the Pacific, with its crystal-clear tropical waters practically begging you to jump in, I had one small problem—acute sinus. I convinced myself that diving was out of the question. After all, how could a fellow whose head sounded like a blocked drainpipe enjoy life underwater?

Then along came Harry Mostert. He informed me, with all the confidence of a man who probably had no medical qualifications whatsoever, that diving would cure my sinus. It was not the advice I expected, but Harry had the advantage of being persistent. Remarkably, he was mostly right. My sinus improved, and a whole new world opened beneath the waves. Since then, eight of my children and two granddaughters have followed the family tradition and collected diving tickets. Clearly, poor judgement can be hereditary.

One memorable dive was off the Duke of York Islands with my two oldest boys. Not long after we descended, my eldest suddenly ran out of air. In great agitation he grabbed my octopus regulator. Unfortunately, patience was in short supply. Instead of purging it first, he took an enthusiastic mouthful of seawater. Apparently deciding that drowning underwater was preferable to drowning slowly, he immediately launched himself toward the surface at maximum speed—a manoeuvre generally frowned upon in diving circles.

My other son and I followed in a calm and orderly ascent, mentally preparing ourselves for ambulances, oxygen bottles and awkward paperwork. To our surprise, when we surfaced there was no medical emergency. Our airborne diver was happily floating around, whistling away as though he'd just completed a pleasant afternoon stroll. We later learned that "whistle while you work" had apparently become "whistle while you ascend"—his own innovative method of preventing an embolism.

The dive club was one of the great family activities of those days. The younger children picnicked on the beach while the adults disappeared underwater to admire fish, coral and the occasional shark who looked slightly too interested. It was wonderful family fun, but the ocean has a way of keeping you humble. One minute you're admiring a clownfish, the next you're wondering whether your son is attempting to break the world record for fastest uncontrolled ascent.

Still, we all survived, my sinus cleared, and the family gained a lifelong love of diving. Harry, of course, claimed full credit. Although Steve Balson dive instructor claims otherwise.

1985-2005

The crater rim on-on run

Twenty years of Hash running before I got a name

The Crater Rim “On-On” Run

Running with the Hash House Harriers in PNG was always slightly awkward for me. Whether it was Lae, Rabaul, Alotau or Kokopo, I never quite fitted the mould. The Hash tradition demanded beer for the “down down” punishment. I substituted soda water. The trick was to drink it so fast they couldn’t finish the song before I handed the mug back empty. Confused admiration all round.

One memorable run circled the rim of Matupit also known as Tavurvur and Rabalanakaia above Rabaul. A new expatriate runner, fresh to PNG and perhaps unfamiliar with the concept of “Don’t step there,” disappeared over the edge into the volcano. We all arrived back at the host’s house slightly dusty and announced to his young wife, trying to sound calm, “Your husband’s fallen into the volcano.” She attempted a brave smile while clearly imagining widowhood and a complicated insurance claim.

Fortunately, the bloke crawled out again covered in ash but very much alive. PNG had claimed many things over the years, but not a Hash runner that day.

Hash clubs all had their own customs. In the early Rabaul days we never even got nicknames. I ran for over twenty years before Kokopo finally fixed that oversight. The decisive moment came during a Christmas run and picnic at Pigeon Islands — appropriately enough, Small Pigeon. We travelled there by banana boat in weather that sensible people would describe as “perhaps tomorrow instead.” Mid-passage, one business manager decided to stand up dramatically in the swell, promptly flew sideways and broke his arm on the gunwale. Straight back to Vunapope Hospital for him. The rest of us, being Hash House Harriers, paused briefly for sympathy before continuing the picnic.

Then the sky darkened properly. One of those PNG storms that looks like the end times approaching from New Ireland. The Harriers voted sensibly to remain on the island until it passed. But I had a young son with me and, more importantly, an anxious wife at home imagining headlines.

So naturally I climbed into an overloaded banana boat with several strangers and almost no freeboard. We blasted through the waves like a smuggler’s launch, water sloshing over the sides while everyone pretended this was perfectly normal maritime practice. We reached shore soaked but alive.

The Hash finally gave me a name after all those years. “Hitch Hiker.”

Which suited me perfectly really. I always seemed to be climbing onto somebody else’s transport with just one goal in mind: Get home before dark.

1985-1991

Jacob part 2

Sea mail

Jacob — Sea Mail

I need to clarify one part of the Jacob story.

The telephone rang. It was the Port Moresby office of Arawa Supermarkets.

They had received a radio message from Jacob at Loloho, where our depot was. By then normal communications with Bougainville had virtually disappeared. Jacob was communicating by two-way radio — short-wave, I suppose — and Arawa Supermarkets had become our rather unlikely telecommunications company.

The message was simple.

The banks were shut. What should he do with the cash?

The BRA were taking fuel and oil without paying for it. There wasn’t much point arguing. They had the guns.

Fortunately, it wasn’t our product anyway.

Our books show our last transactions at Loloho on 4 June 1990. After that, as far as the accounting system was concerned, Bougainville disappeared.

But Jacob hadn’t.

I thought about his cash problem for a while and then rang the radio operator back.

“Send Jacob a message. Exchange the cash for cocoa cheques from ANGCO and New Guinea Cocoa.”

It was an unusual investment strategy, but these were unusual times.

The banks had closed, people had cocoa cheques they couldn’t cash, and Jacob had cash he couldn’t bank.

A perfect market.

Jacob became the Bank of Loloho.

Then we heard nothing.

A year went by.

Eventually one of Coastal Shipping’s boats, the Cosmaris, was allowed into Bougainville.

On its return journey, something arrived for me from Jacob.

An envelope.

Sea mail.

Not exactly Australia Post, but considerably more exciting.

Inside was a message asking me to send him a few things. I remember a battery and oil; there were probably other items I've forgotten.

So I sent them back on the next voyage.

But I added a message of my own.

I suggested that he send me "the documents."

That was code for the cocoa cheques.

I certainly wasn't going to write, Please put a large quantity of negotiable cocoa cheques into a cardboard box and send them through a civil war.

On the next voyage, a cardboard box arrived.

Inside were the cheques.

Jacob had done it.

I took them to ANGCO and New Guinea Cocoa. Fortunately they were still within the twelve-month validity period, so the companies cancelled them and issued fresh cheques.

Now I need to back up slightly.

Before the crisis we had borrowed money to buy four flats at Toniva. Once Bougainville collapsed, the flats weren't producing much joy, but the bank loan certainly was. We had been paying interest only.

So there I was with a pile of perfectly legitimate replacement cocoa cheques.

I paid off the debt.

It was possibly the strangest loan repayment I ever made: cash trapped behind BRA lines had become cocoa cheques, travelled out of a civil war in a cardboard box by sea mail, been replaced with new cheques and finally turned into the repayment of four flats in Toniva.

And the timing was fortunate.

On the Cosmaris's next journey, the BRA burnt her.

Sea mail ceased operations.

Jacob eventually crossed the BRA lines and made his way to Rabaul.

I put him to work as my chief mechanic.

As far as I was concerned, after protecting our trucks, surviving the crisis, becoming an unofficial banker and getting that box of cheques out of Bougainville, Jacob had a job with me for life.

There is, however, one little matter that has sat quietly in the back of my mind ever since.

The money had originally been Mobil's.

Thirty-seven years later — if you get my drift — I happened to meet a Mobil manager.

I decided it was time for confession.

I told him the story and offered to pay the money back.

He gave me a genial laugh and shook his head.

Apparently there had always been a degree of sympathy within Mobil for what we had gone through in Bougainville.

And Mobil had dealt with its own losses rather more elegantly than I had. They had written off their Bougainville assets over ten years, softening the impact year by year.

I had apparently been worrying about it rather longer.

They took ten years to write it off.

It took me thirty-seven years to get it off my chest.

And Jacob?

He was safely in Rabaul.

Which is where the next story begins.

1987-1994

Gold Fever and a Faustian Bargain

My gold share profits bought a house in Rabaul, along with a deal my accountant friend called Faustian. The devil waited until 1994.

Gold Fever

If there was one thing Papua New Guinea taught you, it was that when a gold mine floated on the stock exchange, sensible people became financial geniuses overnight.

Bougainville, Porgera, Lihir… they were the holy trinity of “can’t miss” investments. Dad got into BCL, and I had a crack at the other two. The strategy was wonderfully sophisticated.

Buy at one dollar.

Sell at $2.20.

Immediately.

Some people dream of ten-baggers. Not me. I couldn’t stand the suspense. If the share price paused for breath, I was already reaching for the Sell button. My motto was, “You’ll never go broke taking a profit”… although you might spend the next twenty years explaining why you sold too early.

Still, that little golden windfall became the deposit on an investment house. Pat Pidgeon at ANZ kindly provided the rest. Bank managers were much happier when your deposit had been dug out of the ground by someone else.

The seller, SK, was a colourful entrepreneur. Real estate agent, furniture shop owner and, judging by his finances, an Olympic-level borrower. Every bank manager in town knew him by his first name… and not in a good way.

SK had borrowed to the absolute limit. When he’d run out of relatives, friends and sympathetic lenders, he apparently discovered an untapped source of finance: John’s village.

His loyal right-hand man rounded up a collection of villagers who became proud owners of paperwork they probably couldn’t read. Whether it was a proxy arrangement, a pyramid, a Ponzi scheme or simply organised optimism, I never quite worked out.

The bank eventually did.

Mortgagee sale.

Enter yours truly, flush with mining profits and armed with more confidence than legal knowledge.

I bought the house.

Only afterwards did I discover the furniture wasn’t included.

Apparently nobody had bothered with a chattel mortgage.

Oops.

The nominee owner demanded replacement furniture plus ten percent for his troubles. His enthusiasm for negotiation was inversely proportional to mine.

Fortunately, SK’s right-hand man had fallen out with him. Loyalty in PNG can sometimes expire before the milk does.

He quietly whispered the name of the real villager behind the paperwork.

Let’s call him Ezekiel.

I found Ezekiel, handed him a cheque for a thousand kina, we shook hands, and suddenly the world’s cheapest furniture dispute became yesterday’s problem. Even G.W., the white accountant with his Tolai wife Petra, looked at me with horror and declared it a “Faustian bargain.”

I’d never heard the expression.

I had to look it up.

Apparently it means making a deal with the devil.

At the time I thought it sounded more like an award for creative negotiation.

Sadly, Mother Nature had the last laugh.

The 1994 eruption buried the house under volcanic ash.

So perhaps gw was right after all.

The devil simply waited a few years before repossessing his investment.

1987

Three Boys is not enough

A fourth boy

Three Boys… Surely That’s Enough?

Three boys. Any sensible couple would have stopped there.

Not us.

Ione had three immaculate sets of girls’ clothes quietly attracting moths in the cupboard, and she was determined Jason shouldn’t grow up without a mate. So, as they say, we rolled the dice one more time.

By now we’d become regulars on the roster of formidable German midwife nuns at Vunapope. They were efficient, disciplined and about as sentimental as a military parade.

One nun had a favourite line she’d deliver with perfect timing:

“First you have the pleasure… then you have the pain.”

She clearly enjoyed that one.

She also insisted I leave the delivery room every time she wanted to perform an “examination.” I always thought, “Sister, after four pregnancies, I think I’ve worked out the general mechanics.”

As dawn broke, the sun crept over the Dresden Blue Range of New Ireland. In that quiet moment I heard a voice in my head—my late older brother’s voice.

“It’s a boy…”

Moments later I was invited back inside, and sure enough, out came another son. Before anyone could admire him too much, he christened the room with a perfectly aimed stream.

Without missing a beat, the wonderfully dry German nun declared,

“At least that works.”

I suppose that was the first Apgar score.

So on 25 May 1987, Julian Michael Bluett arrived. He’s now nudging forty, lives just down the street from his mum and, as fate would have it, in the same Bahá’í community. Funny how life goes full circle.

Julian became a high school teacher at Kedron and, like a few members of our tribe, sees the world from a slightly different angle. Somewhere on the spectrum, perhaps—but with a heart as big as New Ireland.

At eighteen he volunteered at a Bahá’í school in Santo, Vanuatu. Within weeks he’d picked up Bislama, and before long he was teaching the locals how to catch fish with a casting spinner.

Imagine that—a young Australian teaching islanders new fishing tricks! I’m sure they politely humoured him… right up until he started catching fish.

Fishing seems to run in the family. Two of my Gemini boys could happily spend all day with a rod in hand, convinced the next cast would land Moby Dick.

Julian eventually returned to Santo as a headmaster, survived a few cyclones that would make Queenslanders nervous, and built a life there for many years. Sadly, that chapter ended with the breakdown of his marriage, but the friendships, the service and the memories remain.

Four boys.

Those girls’ clothes never did get their chance.

1987

Buka or bust

Clutch collateral damage

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

I’m at a junior youth camp with my two PNG daughters when one of the young people introduces herself.

“I’m Alia Tolstov.”

The penny dropped.

“Your grandfather was my first fuel manager in Kieta!”

Back in those days his little daughter had eczema and needed specialist treatment, so he headed to Australia while I was parachuted into the Kieta branch to keep the wheels turning.

Being school holidays, I took four of my own kids with me. There was absolutely no danger of me spending my days chained to a desk. Bill’s two healthy kids joined my four, we threw the bigger ones into the back of the ute, and off we went exploring the length and breadth of Bougainville.

We ventured down to Buin where you could look across to the Shortland Islands and hear stories of pure white sugar making mysterious international voyages that somehow never seemed to involve Customs.

Then north to Buka, crossing the passage on the punt powered by the biggest Caterpillar outboard engines I’d ever seen. I was convinced they were capable of towing Australia a few metres closer to PNG if they really tried.

One day I detoured to Matsungan Island to visit some Bahá’í friends. On the way we found a truck bogged to its axles in mud. Being a helpful soul—and perhaps not a very sensible one—I hooked up my poor little Nissan Navara and attempted to rescue this monster.

The truck barely moved.

My clutch, however, gave its life in heroic service.

A few weeks later, back in Rabaul, the phone rang.

“Paul,” Bill said, “the clutch is gone. Nissan’s questioning the warranty. They reckon someone’s mistreated the vehicle.”

“Not me,” I replied with complete innocence. “I only tried to save a stranded truck twice my size.”

To this day I’ve maintained that I was simply performing community service.

It also taught me an important llesson.

The last time I help a stranger in need… I’ll make sure they’ve got a LandCruiser first.

1988-2026

Tambu

Thiagan became brother in law

Tambu

In 1989, a very slight young Malaysian man—about 40 kilos wringing wet—left home for PNG as a Bahá’í volunteer.

He was the eldest sibling, an electrical technician, and received the princely stipend of K50 a month. The villagers fed him local food and somehow he survived. In fact, he often didn’t even bother claiming the K50. Clearly not management material.

He eventually worked for a trade-store owner and took over running the business. Then he caught the Filipino manager with his hand in the till. The manager’s local wife, looking for a better narrative, accused our 40-kilo hero of impropriety

The villagers threatened him, the store had to close, and I thought: this fellow sounds resourceful. I’ll employ him.

He became one of my managers and worked with us for many years. He even brought his sister to PNG.

Six years later I married her.

So somewhere along the way my employee became my tambu—brother-in-law.

Ten years ago he turned 50, and we decided the obvious way to celebrate was to drive from Rabaul to Kimbe. This was before anyone had explained to us that roads normally have bridges.

At the Toriu River the water was raging and a troop carrier was stuck halfway across. We retreated to a logging camp and commandeered a tip truck. With a short tow rope, our LandCruisers were essentially floated across behind it. The small children, including one-year-old Mona, travelled safely in the truck cab while the adults demonstrated their superior judgement.

Then came the Pandi River on the West New Britain border. There was no obvious crossing, so for K20 we hired a one-eyed man to sit on the bonnet and navigate us up the river until he found the road again.

We made Kimbe, celebrated the 50th, and headed home.

Another K20 secured the services of our one-eyed navigator at the Pandi, but when we reached the Toriu, our rescue tip truck was nowhere to be seen.

But the water had dropped.

The Peace Rock was visible.

Anyone who has watched The Jungle Book knows what that means: the animals may safely approach the water.

Apparently this also applies to LandCruisers.

The first vehicle entered, was grabbed by the current and abruptly swung sideways. The driver panicked, over-revved it, lost traction—and somehow scrambled out the other side.

I stopped at the bank.

Kavitha looked at the river and said, “Let’s do it.”

A five-door LandCruiser is remarkably watertight, which is excellent engineering until you realise it also means the bloody thing floats.

I picked my line, kept the revs sensible, and we sailed—perhaps drove is too generous—across.

Today we came back for his 60th.

Ten years older, hopefully ten years wiser, and this time I’m happy to celebrate without testing whether Toyota actually intended the LandCruiser to be amphibious.

Happy 60th to my tambu—my former manager, my brother-in-law, and, through my divorce and remarriage, an absolute rock.

Not just a Peace Rock.

My rock

1988-1990

Deployment of the fearless

Mad Max, the BRA and ballroom diplomacy

Deployment of the Fearless

I had recruited my first Malaysian Indian and it was a resounding success. He understood both the first world and the third world, which was handy because PNG in those days was often both before lunch. Malaysians were perfect for the job — they grew up surviving with three races, three languages and enough food varieties to settle most diplomatic disputes.

So naturally he recruited his mate Mahdu, who then got renamed Max. Max was another level entirely. Driven. Fearless. Slightly unhinged. The sort of employee every boss secretly wants, and every insurance company fears.

One Boxing Day the truck driver didn't turn up. Fair enough too — most Australians can barely locate consciousness on Boxing Day. But Max simply shrugged, climbed into the fuel truck himself and started delivering. It took a lot to impress Peter Sharp, but even he blinked at that one.

Max's wife was equally energetic. She joined one of those high-powered ladies fundraising committees which somehow included the Prime Minister's wife, the Premier's wife, and my wife. In PNG the social ladder was wonderfully short — one minute you're buying diesel filters, the next you're seated next to cabinet ministers discussing raffle tickets.

At one fundraiser there was a prize for the best dancer. I assessed the competition quickly and realised the safest strategy was immediate political alignment. So, I grabbed the Prime Minister's wife and launched onto the dance floor before anyone else had time to object.

We won the prize. She took home the trophy. I took home a direct line to government. A far better investment.

Meanwhile I'd looked at the cartage rates in Bougainville and suddenly became very brave with Mobil. If they were paying those rates there, surely Rabaul deserved a healthy increase too. The big engineer stared at my numbers and said, "At those rates you should be a distributor." I said, "Excellent idea." And just like that, we became distributors. Which meant we needed more staff.

Max recruited another Malaysian friend, a single journalist, to help in Rabaul. A clever fellow too, except he absolutely refused to adopt a western name. Everyone else happily became "Peter" or "John" after two weeks in PNG. Not him. He remained gloriously and stubbornly Malaysian.

Then Bougainville started going pear-shaped. We evacuated all married staff and families and sent the single bloke instead, which at the time seemed perfectly logical management thinking. Unfortunately, he got shot at. Max exploded. “Why did you send the single man? He hasn’t even had kids yet!”

Apparently in Max’s moral universe, once you’d produced two children, you’d already had a reasonably complete life and could therefore be risked in a civil conflict. So Mad Max volunteered himself instead. The adventure suited his personal narrative.

When he arrived in the North Solomons things were deteriorating rapidly. Police were disappearing, the BRA were effectively running the place, and business confidence was roughly equal to a canoe in a cyclone. At a Chamber of Commerce meeting Max stood up and calmly suggested that local businesses supply uniforms to the BRA so they could at least be properly identified.

An impressively practical suggestion. Unfortunately, Waigani interpreted this as “supporting rebels” rather than “improving workplace visibility.” Soon deportation orders were issued. My biggest business crisis had just developed a second head.

So, I activated the emergency PNG diplomatic channel — wives. I called the Prime Minister through his wife. I called the Premier through his wife. I called Mobil through its boss.

Somewhere between dancing prizes, fuel contracts and political panic, a deal was struck. Max would “voluntarily depart” and the deportation orders would quietly disappear. Crisis over.

The Prime Minister’s wife may have won the dancing trophy that night… but I collected the far more valuable prize: political insurance through ballroom diplomacy.

1989-2026

Kim

In icu

The Melaka Odyssey

My emotional retired manager of thirty years rang Kavi with bad news. Kim was in ICU in Melaka.

Her sons had flown in from Israel and Melbourne and were at her bedside. Kim was much more than an old family friend to Kavi; she had been a mother figure to her.

Kavi didn’t hesitate.

I did.

But not for long. I had a Formula One air ticket to Singapore, so I decided to join her. In fact, with my ticket I could get there quicker.

Mona was distraught. Suddenly we were all heading towards Melaka from different directions.

I caught the midnight flight to Singapore, arriving at Changi ready for the easy part. My Melaka taxi driver, Chong, had been collecting me from Singapore for fifteen years.

Not anymore.

New rules meant he couldn’t come across and pick me up.

My PA tried to find me another taxi. No luck. Eventually two very helpful Korean girls at the information desk suggested a solution: get a Singapore taxi to the border, cross into Malaysia somehow, and have Chong wait for me on the Johor Bahru side.

Simple.

My Singapore taxi driver was the sweetest Chinese lady imaginable. She got lost, consumed a respectable amount of my Telstra roaming data in the process, and gave me a philosophical lecture on life.

Race didn’t matter, she said. Only the heart.

And positivity.

By this stage I needed both.

At the border I discovered I appeared to be the only matsale attempting this particular migration amongst a mass of humanity.

I thought I could simply walk across.

No.

I had already officially left Singapore, but apparently that did not mean I could actually leave Singapore on foot. I had to queue for a bus.

Eventually I squeezed aboard, standing room only, surrounded by what I guessed was Singapore's night shift heading home to Johor Bahru.

Then my suitcase made a break for freedom.

It rolled off on its wheels through the crush and rammed an innocent lady. She calmly suggested that I wedge it against a pole.

Clearly she had crossed the Causeway before.

I eventually emerged into Malaysia and faced the next challenge: finding the exit from the enormous terminal and locating Chong, who was waiting somewhere outside.

We finally found each other.

Chong's taxi has now clocked more than a million kilometres, and I suspect a reasonable percentage of those kilometres have involved the Bluett family.

The fare to Melaka was RM500, where my wife's ex-husband's car was waiting for me.

If you want to know what is happening in the automotive industry, forget Google. Ask Chong.

For the next couple of hours I received a comprehensive briefing on solid-state batteries, electric hybrids without conventional gearboxes, engines driving alternators which drive electric motors, and why reverse gear is apparently becoming an unnecessary historical curiosity.

Chong had even disconnected his own fan belt and installed an electric fan to save fuel.

His Korean car, meanwhile, had a Mercedes engine.

I had no idea whether I was travelling to Melaka or attending an automotive engineering conference.

Eventually we arrived.

An elderly Chinese aunty who lived next door was guarding the keys to the car. Keys secured, I set off across Melaka.

Unfortunately, my GPS was upside down.

Two missed turns later I reached my hotel.

From my room I could see the hospital.

I went downstairs for an Asian buffet lunch, and the memories came flooding back. I had been to this same hospital years earlier with Kavi during our unsuccessful IVF attempts.

That disappointment had eventually sent our lives down another road — towards adoption and children we might otherwise never have had.

Now, years later, the same hospital had brought us back for another deeply emotional reason.

Kim was on oxygen when I saw her, watched carefully by her Indonesian maid. Her husband and two sons greeted me emotionally and brought me up to date on her condition.

Kavi, meanwhile, had missed her connection and was asleep in an airport lounge somewhere on her own odyssey to Melaka.

I returned to the hotel and promptly slept through dinner.

At about one in the morning hunger finally defeated exhaustion, so I ventured into the late-night streets of Melaka.

Open drains.

Broken concrete.

Dark streets.

And then, glowing like a beacon of civilisation, a 24-hour Indian restaurant.

Ten ringgit bought me curry chicken, rice and teh tarik.

The curry made my nose run but mercifully spared my tongue.

Fed, exhausted and slightly scorched internally, I picked my way back past the open drains to my old but comfortable hotel.

It had taken a plane, a taxi, an international border, a bus, a runaway suitcase, another taxi, a million-kilometre automotive lecture, an upside-down GPS and a midnight curry to get there.

But I was there.

Sometimes family is not defined by blood, nationality or even the complicated routes by which people enter our lives.

Sometimes someone simply becomes family.

Kim had become family.

And when family is in ICU, you find a way to get to Melaka.

1989

The Malaysian

Rajah

The Malaysians

As I sit beside Kim’s hospital bed in Melaka, watching oxygen helping her breathe while her immune system seems to be conducting a civil war against itself, I find myself thinking about her husband Rajah.

For thirty years Rajah was one of my managers in Papua New Guinea.

I sometimes called him my mascot manager.

That sounds terribly disrespectful until you understand that it was one of the highest compliments I could give him.

Rajah was humble, resilient and pragmatic. He did not need to be the most important man in the room. He did not make speeches about problems.

He solved them.

And almost everybody liked him.

In Papua New Guinea, where managing people can occasionally require the combined talents of a diplomat, policeman, village elder, accountant and rugby referee, being liked while still getting the job done is a considerable achievement.

Rajah was an Indian Malaysian, and over the years he was one of about twenty Malaysians I employed in PNG.

Looking back, they formed part of the backbone of our company.

There was something about Malaysia and Papua New Guinea that worked.

Perhaps it was because Malaysians arrived without many of the assumptions that expatriates from Australia or Europe sometimes carried with them. Malaysia itself was multicultural, multilingual and complicated. Chinese, Indians and Malays had spent generations living, trading, negotiating, arguing, eating each other’s food and learning when to compromise.

A Malaysian could grow up speaking three or four languages and regard that as perfectly normal.

PNG did not frighten them.

A different language over the next mountain?

Fine.

Different customs in the next province?

Fine.

Someone wants to negotiate for three hours before getting to the point?

They had met relatives like that.

They also understood something fundamental about doing business in our part of the world.

Relationships came before paperwork.

Not instead of paperwork, unfortunately. Accountants like me still insisted on that.

But before it.

Rajah was particularly good at this.

When we sent him to Kimbe, we did not exactly present him with an established petroleum empire.

We gave him a vacant block of land between Shell and BP.

That was approximately it.

On either side stood two international oil companies.

In the middle stood Islands Petroleum, looking rather hopeful.

We were effectively begging Mobil to let us get started.

I had confidence.

Mobil had caution.

In retrospect, Mobil may have understood our financial position better than I did.

When I ordered a prime mover for the new operation, we did not yet have our own semi-trailer.

No problem.

BP lent us theirs.

This was where Kimbe became interesting.

BP had obtained the contract from Shell to supply the oil palm company, but the local carrier who was supposed to move the fuel failed to turn up with the trucks.

Suddenly there was fuel to move and nobody moving it.

That was our opportunity.

We had the prime mover.

BP had the trailer.

Somebody else had the fuel.

And there I was in the middle of it all, carrying twice the volume using somebody else's equipment.

It suited my smoke-and-mirrors style of business perfectly.

We looked considerably bigger than we were.

This was important because at that stage looking bigger than we were was one of our principal assets.

Meanwhile, another opportunity was developing from the sea.

We had started shipping fuel ourselves.

When Shell cut off Hargy's credit, suddenly an important customer needed fuel and the conventional supply chain had stopped.

I happened to have a shipload.

Cash on delivery.

Cheque at the wharf.

Thank you very much.

Another door opened in West New Britain.

There were many other steps in building the Kimbe business, some of which remain commercially sensitive even after all these years.

There is an old shipping maxim, usually attributed in one form or another to the great Greek shipowners:

Know something nobody else knows.

I liked that philosophy.

Although in my case it was sometimes:

Know something. Anything. And move before everybody else works it out.

Kimbe grew.

So did we.

And people like Rajah made that possible because somebody had to turn my bright ideas into an actual business.

Entrepreneurs tend to receive too much credit for this.

We remember having the idea.

We conveniently forget the poor manager who then had to make it work on Monday morning.

Rajah had to deal with the trucks, drivers, customers, suppliers, staff, breakdowns, shortages and the thousand little dramas that never appear in company histories.

He did it without fuss.

That quality was shared by many of the Malaysians who worked with us over the years.

They adapted.

They did not expect PNG to become Malaysia for their convenience.

They ate local food, learned enough language to communicate, worked with Papua New Guinean staff and generally accepted that things would not always happen according to the timetable.

This last quality was particularly useful.

A person obsessed with punctuality can suffer badly in Papua New Guinea.

A Malaysian might look at the situation, shrug and find another way.

There was also a cultural familiarity with extended families and obligations that helped.

PNG’s wantok system could bewilder newcomers. Why was an employee supporting cousins, uncles, nephews and people whose precise relationship could take twenty minutes to explain?

Malaysians often understood the principle immediately.

Their version might operate differently, but family obligation was hardly an exotic concept.

Nor was respect for elders, sharing food, avoiding unnecessary public humiliation, or finding a way through a disagreement without requiring somebody to formally surrender.

These things mattered when managing people.

Of course, my Malaysian managers were individuals. Some were brilliant. Some were difficult. Some probably thought I was difficult.

They were correct.

But across the years there was a remarkable compatibility.

About twenty Malaysians passed through our company, and collectively they left a footprint far larger than their number.

Rajah stayed for thirty years.

Thirty years.

When somebody works with you for that long, “employee” becomes an inadequate word.

You have survived recessions together.

Fuel shortages.

Customers who do not pay.

Trucks that refuse to start.

Governments.

Banks.

Oil companies.

And, perhaps most challenging of all, me.

Now I am sitting in Melaka beside his wife.

Kim is still on oxygen.

Her sons have come from Israel and Melbourne. Kavi came because Kim had been like a mother to her.

And tonight I leave for Australia.

There is something strange about departures from hospital rooms.

You want a conclusion.

Hospitals do not provide one on demand.

So I sit here looking at Rajah and Kim and thinking not only about friendship, but about the extraordinary chain of events that connected us.

A Malaysian Indian schoolteacher and his Chinese Malaysian wife.

A little petroleum company in Papua New Guinea.

A vacant block of land in Kimbe.

Shell on one side.

BP on the other.

Mobil cautiously watching.

A borrowed trailer.

A prime mover.

A shipload of fuel.

And an opportunity.

From such unlikely ingredients businesses are built.

But companies are not really built from tanks, trucks and ships.

Those are just the hardware.

They are built by people who stay.

People who adapt.

People who solve tomorrow morning’s problem without demanding applause for solving yesterday’s.

People like the Malaysians who came to work with us in Papua New Guinea.

And especially people like Rajah.

My mascot manager.

Humble.

Resilient.

Pragmatic.

Liked by everyone.

For thirty years he helped turn my smoke and mirrors into something solid.

Sitting beside Kim tonight, I am very grateful he did.

1989

Bhaskaran

Army and rebels with guns and a pepper story



Bhaskaran in earlier years

Bhaskaran — An Indomitable 90 Years

Yesterday was Uncle Bhaskaran’s 90th birthday, so Kavi asked me to visit him in Melaka. A few hours ago we were sitting together swapping stories, although these days Uncle is a little hard of hearing, so some of the stories required considerably more volume than they did when they originally happened.

We had seen Bhaskaran and his wife, Saro, at Kim’s funeral. They are members of our community and were close friends of Kim, so this visit came with both sadness and celebration: a funeral one day, a 90th birthday the next. Life has a way of compressing the whole human experience into a very short space.

Bhaskaran’s life has certainly not lacked adventure.

Back in the 1970s he was working as an engineer in Cameroon. One day he removed a Coca-Cola bottle from a deep freeze. The top exploded with such force that he lost the sight in one eye.

From that point onwards, Saro naturally assumed an additional responsibility: navigation consultant.

She would occasionally offer driving advice from the passenger seat, presumably on the perfectly reasonable grounds that between them they still possessed three functioning eyes.

Years later Bhaskaran took a three-year engineering contract in Bougainville. It was during the sunset years of his working life and, tragically, also the sunset years of peaceful, civilised Bougainville before the crisis overwhelmed the island.

One night Bhaskaran and Saro were driving from Arawa to Kieta for a committee meeting.

They rounded a bend and suddenly encountered a roadblock.

Saro saw it first.

“Army! Stop!”

About fifteen armed soldiers surrounded them and began questioning them.

While this was happening, another vehicle drove straight past the roadblock. The soldiers shouted at it to stop, resting their rifles across Bhaskaran’s car as they took aim.

Two people emerged from the other vehicle.

The soldiers opened fire and killed them.

The following day the newspapers revealed an extraordinary and horrifying detail: the two men who had been shot were themselves members of the Defence Force.

Bhaskaran and Saro were eventually allowed to continue.

Understandably, enthusiasm for the committee meeting had evaporated.

They said prayers, and my manager Bill — Baljit — urged them to stay the night rather than attempt the return journey. But they had left two of their children alone at home and felt they had to get back.

So, after witnessing something most of us would struggle to comprehend, they quietly drove home through the night.

Peacefully.

Some time later Bhaskaran was driving with a colleague near Aropa Airport. The army was operating around the airport when two armed rebels suddenly stopped them at gunpoint.

This time the objective was carjacking.

Bhaskaran had his engineering drawings with him. The rebels looked at them, recognised that they were his working papers, and allowed him to keep them.

They took the car instead.

But before sending Bhaskaran and his colleague away, they had a message they wanted delivered to the army.

“We will win this war.”

Not long afterwards the rebels issued an ultimatum to expatriates: leave within two weeks or risk being shot on sight.

Bhaskaran and Saro left Bougainville six months short of completing their three-year contract.

Engineering contracts tend to contain clauses covering salary, accommodation, travel and annual leave.

“Evacuate within two weeks or be shot” was presumably somewhere in the fine print.

Fortunately, I also remember Bhaskaran from much happier times.

I once met him with my Kavieng manager, Shahin, at the Malagan Lodge in Kavieng.

It was a beautiful beachside setting, but the wind was blowing hard.

Uncle decided his meal needed pepper.

He shook the pepper shaker enthusiastically over his plate.

Unfortunately, because of the wind — combined with the disadvantage of having only one good eye — the pepper was landing somewhere entirely different from where Uncle believed it was landing.

Shahin watched this operation for a while before deciding that intervention was necessary.

He took possession of the pepper shaker, calculated the wind direction like an artillery officer, moved some distance upwind and released the pepper into the breeze.

Perfect trajectory.

Perfect landing.

Mission accomplished.

After surviving Cameroon, exploding Coke bottles, Bougainville roadblocks, armed soldiers, rebels, carjackings and evacuation threats, Uncle Bhaskaran had finally encountered a problem requiring the combined expertise of an engineer, a fuel depot manager and a strong coastal wind.

At 90, he remains an indomitable character — carrying a lifetime of extraordinary stories, a good wife beside him to help with the bits he cannot see, and now occasionally all of us helping with the bits he cannot quite hear.

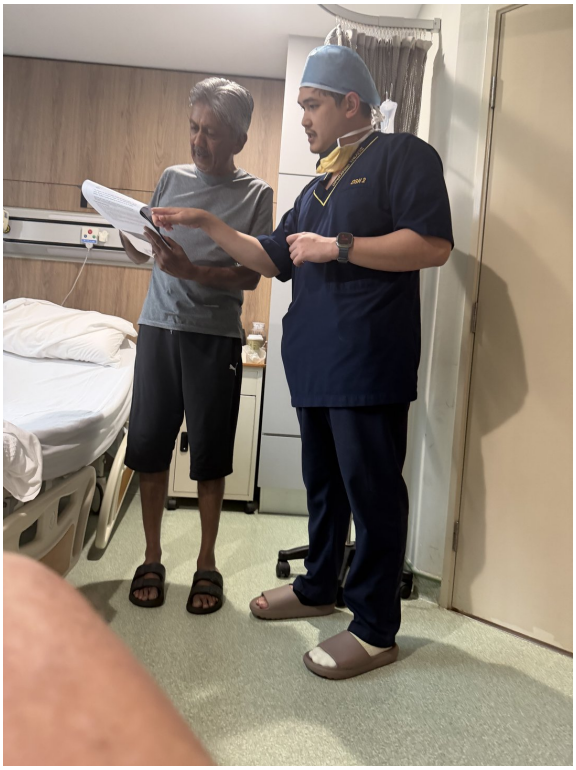
Happy 90th, Uncle Bhaskaran.

What a life.

1989 -2026

Shahin

My right hand man



Shahin and the heart surgeon

My Right-Hand Man

So there I was in a Kuala Lumpur hospital, watching Unabomber on Netflix from my bed while doing my five-year colonoscopy — perhaps not the most soothing choice of hospital entertainment.

But the real reason I arranged things for today was that in the room next door was my friend and long-time manager of 37 years, getting ready for something considerably more serious: open-heart surgery, a triple bypass and a valve replacement.

He started with us in Rabaul in 1989 and has since done the grand tour — Rabaul, Arawa, Kavieng, Alotau, Madang and now Port Moresby, with relief stints in Popondetta and Lae. Hagen is about the only branch left. At this stage I think we can safely let him off.

He was my right-hand man through the Bougainville civil war and the Rabaul volcanic eruption, and has travelled alongside me through much of the growth of Islands Petroleum.

He has also survived something possibly just as dangerous — my driving.

Through wars, volcanoes, landslides, potholes and various examples of Papua New Guinea road engineering, he would sit beside me and eventually say, with extraordinary tact:

“Boss… maybe slow down a little.”

Never panic. Never criticism. Just a gentle suggestion that perhaps arriving alive might be useful.

His wife was working in our Kavieng office when they met. She is half Mussau and half Western Islands — Wuvulu, Aua, Hermit Islands country, with those fascinating Micronesian connections. Their family and mine have become intertwined over the years; my children’s cousins are second cousins to their children, so somewhere along the line we have become family as well as friends.

His PNG citizenship application is now pending, although after nearly four decades of service to the country I reckon PNG has already claimed him.

He is probably the most universally popular manager we have ever had — loved by staff, customers and colleagues — and today he also serves as a director of the company.

When he turned 64 recently, I couldn’t resist singing him the Beatles’ When I’m Sixty-Four. With a little modern technology I cloned my voice, changed the lyrics to include the names of his five children and extolled his many virtues.

His kids loved it.

He did too

Today wasn’t quite so funny.

Standing beside his hospital bed while the surgeon went through the risks of a triple bypass and valve replacement was painful. You hear words like bleeding, stroke, kidney failure and all the things that can go wrong, and suddenly 37 years of adventures flash through your mind.

I deliberately timed my little procedure and asked for the room next door.

For most of those 37 years, he has been my right-hand man.

Today, in some very small way, I wanted to be his.

Good luck, old mate. ❤

Room 744 and 745

1990-1994

Call the army

Peter Sharp became our enemy

Shipping

I had a partnership with Dad. Of sorts

Dad formed a shipping venture with a German volunteer and informed me I was a partner. He generously allocated me 49.9%.

"I don't want to be a partner," I said.

Dad ignored me completely.

Apparently, in family business, declining is merely regarded as opening negotiations.

Mum was quite concerned. Shipping involved debt, ships, wharves and all sorts of things sensible mothers worry about. So, in an act of supreme logic, I took over the whole thing, assumed the debt, and started shipping fuel.

Actually, it worked rather well. The shipping customers became fuel customers, and the fuel customers became shipping customers. Accountants call it synergy. Everyone else calls it selling people two things instead of one.

We bought the old Burns Philp wharf in Rabaul — the very wharf where the Queen had once come ashore. Her Majesty had departed long before we arrived, but I like to think we inherited some of the prestige, if not the maintenance budget.

Now Peter Sharp used our wharf free of charge for his ship-agency launches. We eventually made the radical business decision of charging him.

Peter's response was simple.

"No."

Our response was equally simple.

We removed the battery from one of his launches while it was tied up at our wharf.

Negotiations deteriorated rapidly.

Peter dispatched a truckload of healthy specimens who arrived, threw our welding machines into the harbour, and gave some of our staff an unscheduled fitness programme.

At this point my German partner decided matters had moved beyond normal commercial discussion and called the Papua New Guinea Defence Force.

Within minutes armed soldiers were chasing Peter's men across Simpson Harbour in banana boats waving semi-automatic weapons and displaying a level of enthusiasm not generally found in maritime dispute resolution manuals.

The launch was eventually beached somewhere around Malaguna and the occupants abandoned ship and headed for the hills, presumably reflecting on the finer points of wharf fees.

The next day our mutual lawyer — one of the very few expatriate lawyers in town — summoned both parties and suggested a truce before someone escalated things further and called in the Navy.

Peace was declared.

Peter never used our wharf again.

The lawyers got paid.

The soldiers got a good story.

The welding machines remained on the bottom of the harbour.

And I learned that in Papua New Guinea, charging someone a wharf fee could occasionally lead to a naval engagement.

1990

Shipping

Crazy German

By Easter 1991, my crazy father and his even crazier German protégé had acquired what they optimistically described as a work boat from Irian Jaya. “Work boat” was generous. It was a timber contraption under ten metres long, built with all the structural confidence of a garden shed. It wasn’t exactly survey-class; it was more “pray-class.” Still, it floated, just, and before long it was hauling bags of copra from Rakanda Plantation, proving that optimism really can overcome engineering.

We pointed this nautical masterpiece towards the Duke of Yorks, towing behind it my tiny aluminium dinghy with an even tinier 5 hp outboard. If the mother ship sank, our escape plan was apparently to overcrowd the tinny and paddle.

Our host was Nick, the Dutch aussie giant. A carpenter by trade, he regarded 40 hp outboards the way most people regard shopping bags. He’d sling one over his shoulder and stroll up the wharf without breaking stride.

When I announced we were going fishing, Nick looked at our little dinghy, our toy motor and then at me with genuine concern. It was the sort of look usually reserved for people who announce they’re rowing to Japan.

The next morning we returned with enough Spanish mackerel to feed everyone for days.

Nick said very little.

Which, for Nick, was as close as you’d get to an apology.

By then my boys were getting older. Fishing had become an obsession, motorbikes a close second, and the Duke of Yorks their playground.

Nick had one quirk. He refused to appear in photographs. As a sixteen-year-old his father had thrown him out of home, and before leaving he had quietly cut his own face out of every family photo album. From that day on he simply declined every camera. Behind that unusual habit was one of the kindest, most generous blokes you’d ever meet.

Then the weather turned.

Our little Indonesian masterpiece would probably have ploughed through it quite happily. My ex-wife, however, took one look at the whitecaps and delivered a maritime ruling worthy of Lloyd’s of London.

“I’m not getting on that boat.”

There was no appeal.

“Get a plane, or I’m staying.”

A slight complication: the rakanda airstrip had been closed.

Nick, who clearly had a flexible interpretation of aviation administration, calmly said, “Use my name.”

So I rang civil aviation

“Hello, it’s Nick. Just thought you’d like to know the airstrip has been repaired.”

As far as I could tell, it looked perfectly serviceable from where I was standing.

An Airlink aircraft, already heading back from Namatanai, obligingly diverted to collect us. My family flew safely back to Rabaul, the boys made it to school on time, and our questionable little work boat chugged home under its own steam as if none of this was remotely unusual.

Looking back, it probably wasn’t our finest example of aviation protocol.

But it was a very good Easter.

Sinkers and floaters

A log ship on a reef outside Port Moresby

Sinkers and Floaters

With a fleet consisting of tugs, barges and more optimism than common sense, we decided to get into the salvage business. To make ourselves look respectable we partnered with a large Dutch salvage company, Weijsmuller, people who knew what they were doing.

Our big break came when a log ship parked itself on a reef outside Port Moresby. Parking is perhaps the wrong word. “Ran aground spectacularly” would be more accurate.

The plan was simple. Remove the logs, remove the fuel, wait for a high tide and pull the ship off the reef. Salvage experts make everything sound simple.

My first task was to engage two rival groups of banana boat operators. Negotiating peace between them was probably more dangerous than the salvage operation itself.

Our barge had a crane. The logs were sorted into two categories: floaters and sinkers. The floaters went into the sea where they bobbed around happily. The sinkers went onto the barge because they had all the buoyancy of a concrete church.

At one stage I wanted to inspect the ship. The sea was heaving as waves crashed over the reef. The Dutch experts pointed at a rope ladder hanging down the side of the vessel.

“Jump onto the ladder at the top of the wave,” they said. I looked at the sea, looked at the ladder and decided that, as a distinguished businessman, I possessed superior judgment. “No,” I thought, “I’ll jump after the wave has passed. Much safer.”

The moment I leapt, a new wave arrived from somewhere near Indonesia, picked me up like a rag doll and deposited me back into the boat. The Dutchmen were highly amused. My ego suffered more damage than the ship.

Attempt number two: I followed instructions, jumped at the crest of the wave and landed neatly on the ladder. Getting off was easier. I jumped in the sea. Sometimes there is a lesson in life. This was one of those times. The unloading continued. A couple of sinker logs escaped and disappeared forever into the reef. They are probably still there today, providing accommodation for fish and confusing future archaeologists.

Finally, the fuel was pumped off, the tide rose, the tugs pulled, the ship floated free and everyone celebrated. We were paid very well.

The Dutch salvors got a ship off a reef. The ship owner got his vessel back. The fish got a couple of free logs.

Border control at Nonga

140 people, one satellite dish and a State of Origin

Border Control at Nonga

When the wife’s away, strange things happen. It was State of Origin season. My fifth son had returned to the ample bosom of his mother in Australia, and I was temporarily living as a free-range PNG bachelor. Then disaster struck. The local TV station went down.

Normally this would have caused civil unrest across East New Britain, but not at our place in Nonga. We had two things: a satellite dish, and a generator.

Which in those days made me roughly equivalent to Telecom PNG. So naturally I invited the village over. Two villages. About 140 people all up.

I organised the house like a diplomatic summit:

• Blues supporters upstairs with the small TV
• Maroons downstairs with the better atmosphere
• neutrals wherever they could find oxygen

The Chiefs might be coming one day, but that night I had the Indians — my loyal army of Haus Meris and kitchen assistants. I recruited five maids into the operation.

Now feeding 140 people in PNG is not done with cocktail sausages and imported cheese cubes. We already had a catering system: one 25kg bag of rice, one industrial carton of tinned mackerel. With a few improvements it could feed the North Coast villages. So the kitchen exploded into action.

Rice cookers rattling. Pots boiling. Every piece of meat in the freezer dragged out like emergency wartime reserves. Smoke, steam, shouting, laughter.

People I knew. People I didn’t know. Friends, relatives, neighbours, drifters, petty criminals and several men who appeared to have simply followed the smell of free food through the jungle.

Some couldn’t fit inside and watched the game through the louvre windows like football refugees.

Then came the final humiliation. Queensland lost. The house split emotionally into two nations.

Upstairs the Blues supporters celebrated like they’d liberated Paris. Downstairs the Maroons looked like mourners at a state funeral. One bloke stared silently into the distance for so long I thought he’d died standing up.

But socially, I’d won over the village. After the game I drove the old ladies home through the dark volcanic roads of Nonga while, back at the house, two entrepreneurial youths conducted what might politely be called “drawer-based economic reform.” They stole some old stale cheques from my room.

The next morning, they proudly marched into the bank only to discover the account had less life in it than the Queensland attack. But honestly, I didn’t care. For one glorious night our volcano refuge house became part sports club, part refugee camp, part community hall, part open-air prison social.

And somewhere amongst the steam of rice and perfume of tinned mackerel, I realised something very important about PNG: if you feed 140 people during State of Origin, they’ll love you forever. Even if Queensland loses.

Did you say four marlin?

Four Canadian schoolboys, four marlin, one radio call

Did You Say Four Marlin?

My older boys were at boarding school in Canada and one holiday they brought home two American Iranian classmates. Another mate joined us too, Ryan Ludher, son of Bill, my former business partner, who was also a classmate that year.

The visitors all called me “Mr Bluett.” “None of that,” I said. “Call me Pops.” In America it’s a father, in Australia it’s a grandfather, and in our family it’s a term of affection. My stepchildren use it too — not to replace their dad, just because it stuck. And so began the legend of Pops.

To show the boys a proper PNG adventure, we chartered the J Michelin, engaged our deckie of choice, Simon Woolcott, and headed off marlin fishing.

The J Michelin was a displacement hull powered by what sounded suspiciously like an old truck engine. It didn’t so much travel as negotiate with the ocean. By the time we finally crawled out beyond Duke of York and reached a FAD that had been sitting there for six months, everyone was relaxed. Very relaxed. We trolled. And trolled. And trolled some more.

The blue mountains of New Ireland floated on the horizon like a postcard while dugout canoes wisely remained tucked inside the lagoon. Nothing was happening. I found a bunk and started reading a book.

Then all hell broke loose. “ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!” The reel screamed. The boat slowed. People yelled. A marlin launched itself into the air. Lines were retrieved at Olympic speed while someone received frantic instructions on how to use a game chair. Before he knew it, the angler was shackled to the rod and engaged in hand-to-fin combat with a fish bigger than he was.

These Canadian schoolboys had never caught a shrimp, let alone a prawn. Suddenly they were wrestling 100-kilo marlin. The learning curve was vertical. Strange things started happening. Some marlin struck and immediately escaped. Some struck and stayed attached. Some were boated.

At one point we were hauling in a marlin when two others swam alongside to see what all the fuss was about. It was like a committee meeting.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. Two hours of chaos. Excitement. Disappointment. Adrenaline. Laughter. And fish slime.

But the funniest part came later. Of the four marlin landed that day, the four visiting classmates each caught one. My two sons and I lost ours. The Marlin God had

clearly examined the passenger list and decided international visitors deserved special treatment.

Even more remarkable, each marlin seemed perfectly sized to match the Grade 5 student attached to it. The Marlin God not only smiled upon us — he was apparently running a handicap system.

As we headed home, our skipper radioed another boat fishing nearby. “Stephanie, Stephanie, this is J Michelin.” The skipper, cool as ever, delivered his report. “We landed four marlin.”

There was a pause. Then came the reply from the fancy lure-fishing crowd, delivered in a wonderfully nasal drawl. “Did you say… FOUR marlin?” The disbelief was magnificent. Not “Congratulations.” Not “Well done.” Just: “Did you say… FOUR marlin?”

To this day, whenever our family needs a laugh, someone will look across the table and repeat the immortal words. “Did you say four marlin?” And everybody laughs.

On the way home we gave the fish to villages along the coast. The memories, however, we kept.

The line “Did you say… FOUR marlin?” is the perfect punchline because every fisherman knows that some days you troll for eight hours and catch sunburn. Four marlin in two hours sounds suspiciously like a fishing story — even when it’s true.

1990

Margaret’s academic and literary career

Murder she wrote

My Irrepressible Mum, Margaret Bluett

Some of you will remember my mum, Margaret Bluett. Others may have come across her under the name Margaret Tebele, the name she used when writing fiction in Papua New Guinea.

Same woman. Same determination. Same inability to sit quietly when there was something useful to be done.

Mum became a Bahá’í in 1951 after six months of weekly study and discussion. In 1965, she and Dad pioneered to the Papua New Guinea Highlands with their five children. PNG was to shape the rest of her life.

She later moved to Lae, helped establish the Bahá’í centre there, served as the first Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of Papua New Guinea, travelled extensively around the country and spent years working with communities in places where getting there was often half the achievement.

PNG also got into her writing.

Her first book appeared in 1977: Sampela Piksa Long Bahá’í Titsing — roughly, Some Pictures About Bahá’í Teachings. Mum understood something very simple: if you wanted to communicate with people, use a language they understood and, where possible, add pictures. Nobody ever complained that a book had too many pictures.

In 1984 came Development Ideas for Bahá’í Communities in Papua New Guinea. The title was not exactly destined for the airport bestseller rack, but the contents came from years of practical experience rather than an air-conditioned office somewhere far away.

Then came one of my favourite Mum stories.

In 1991 she entered a novel, She Walks to Death, in the PNG National Literature Competition under the name Margaret Tebele.

The judges read it and awarded it first prize.

Then they discovered Margaret Tebele was a white Australian woman.

The decision was changed and Mum was awarded second prize.

Second in a national competition is nothing to complain about, of course. But I have always enjoyed the fact that before the judges knew who Margaret Tebele was, they had already decided which book they thought was best.

She wrote another novel too, a murder story set around Lae and the Butibam community. I have searched for it and cannot find a copy or even a proper record of it. Perhaps it is sitting in a forgotten box somewhere. Or perhaps, being a murder mystery, somebody successfully disposed of the evidence.

If anyone remembers it, I would love to know.

Mum's appetite for learning was every bit as strong as her appetite for writing.

At an age when many people are thinking about slowing down, Mum went back to university.

Her master's research examined weddings in North Queensland during the 1920s. So if you ever needed to know the social arrangements, clothing or customs surrounding a Townsville wedding a century ago, Mum was probably your woman.

Then came the PhD.

Her doctorate examined the resettlement of Iranian Bahá'ís in Sydney and Canberra following the Iranian Revolution, a subject closely connected with her later book Exodus from Iran. She studied through James Cook University in Cairns and Townsville and completed her PhD at 71.

Most universities have mature-age students.

James Cook had Mum.

The books kept coming: Nightingales in Terra Nova in 2005, Birds into Paradise in 2007, Exodus from Iran in 2010 and A Garden of Changeless Splendour in 2019.

Forty-two years separated her first published book from the last of those.

Along the way she wrote articles and shorter histories about Papua New Guinea, the Bahá'í community, pioneering and community development, including Late Start, Rapid Expansion in PNG.

What strikes me now is not simply how much Mum wrote, studied or accomplished.

It is that she never seemed to consider herself finished.

There was always another person whose story ought to be recorded, another piece of history in danger of disappearing, another community worth learning about, another book to read, another manuscript to write.

Mum died on 21 June 2026, aged 93.

She had spent more than seventy years serving, travelling, studying, writing and asking questions.

Irrepressible seems about right.

From the Daga Hills to Kautru Island: Bahá'í Growth in PNG, 1985–1991

How the Faith took root across Papua New Guinea in the late 1980s, and how local believers took the lead.

Baha’i Community in PNG - 1985 to 1991

Chapter Seven

By 1985 we had PNG covered with communities in all nineteen provinces and a new Counsellor Dr. Sirus Naraqi. He encouraged the Assembly to focus on vastly increasing the number of believers - I remember him suggesting a million as a possibility. He also wanted to increase the number of delegates to Convention in a process of creating ambitious goals believing if we have faith they will be achieved. He suggested applying either to the House of Justice for extra funding or encourage rich Persians to move to Papua New Guinea by helping them to acquire land to establish businesses. He reminded me of a similar approach by Hand of the Cause Dr Muhajir who also encouraged mass conversion. Dr. Muhajir counselled the National Assembly to buy properties, at least one in every big town and all the land we could acquire under Mission leases. He believed property prices would rise over time and it would be too late for our budget to keep pace with the exponential growth he was predicting for the country. He was right because as the Pacific nations looked towards Asia for funding property became very expensive. The pioneers currently operating businesses favoured an independent approach. One way was to find a property containing a business and obtain a bank loan to purchase it, use the cash flow to pay off the loan and when it was paid donate the property it to the National Assembly.

John Mills and Rodney Hancock bought a trade store in Rabaul with living quarters attached and found a suitable believer with a family to live there and run the business supervised by them. By 1987 the goal was achieved and the community owned a Baha’i Centre in an area originally known as Malay Town. Counsellor Naraqi and other travellers attended the opening ceremony of this Centre. In Lae the Bluett family bought a house and donated it to the Local Assembly of Lae as a development project with the suggestion the rental income could be used to subsidise local events or teaching projects. This income was helpful for a few years however Baha’is are not exempt from the problems created by social disintegration. By the late 1980s the crime rate in PNG was rising and impacted on the Baha’i community and the Lae community was shocked when the family renting the house were murdered during a robbery. The LSA sold the house as the Assembly didn’t

feel comfortable owning a property in an area prone to criminal activities. The Rabaul Centre experienced another kind of catastrophe in 1994 when two volcanoes erupted simultaneously and destroyed the town and sadly the Baha'i Centre was in the heart of the devastated area. Fortunately, no lives were lost in the disaster, the town was moved to Kokopo and began to rebuild itself into a new kind of place. People are so resilient they seem to survive calamities in the spirit of the writings 'My calamity is my providence'.

The Rabaul Baha'i Centre on opening day.

Rabaul town is destroyed by the volcano eruption in 1994 when Malay town near the airport was at the epicentre. Paul and Noel Bluett survey the damage to the Baha'i Centre.

A National Assembly meeting in Rabaul in 1986 –
Back Row: Paul Bluett, Ramu Sannyasi, Margaret Bluett, Herman Korus, Silan Nadarajah, and David Hall. Front Row: Erama Ugaia, Aminio Bale, and Craig Volker.

To commemorate the Year of Peace 1986 the Baha'i Community in Lae in the Council Chambers hosted an exhibition. Uvula Samna the Premier of Morose Province was presented with a Baha'i book by Margaret Bluett and Daisy Bateman from New Ireland.

Another process began in the mid-eighties which delighted and amazed us, the phenomenal growth of the number of Baha'is amongst the Daga people who live in the Rabaraba District of the Milne Bay Province. Their original teacher Francis Ivarap believed the Message of Baha'u'llah was the answer for his people. The message spread like wild fire through the area and within a short time there were over two thousand believers in that area. A minister who worked amongst the Daga people for many years wrote in his memoirs they had a special gift of working together and consulting on everything that many Western nations might envy.

I remember Ann Hall telling me about one of her experiences amongst the Daga People. She had walked into the area, a long hike from Alotau, to attend the Commemoration of the Martyrdom of the Bab and she believed a thousand-people attended the service. They didn't have a Centre then so they stood on the grass and during the service it began to rain heavily. Ann said no one moved they just stood there getting very wet and continued praying.

The National office received regular feast reports from those beautiful people which were heart- warming for the Secretary, not only would they count how many attended but they also counted and listed the individual pots of food everyone contributed for the event. The established Mission deserted the people when they became Baha'is withdrawing all services. Undismayed, the people responded by starting their own primary school, erecting buildings, and planting gardens. The National Assembly assisted by finding them a teacher, and then the little school caught the attention of the Department of Education and the Government provided the funds for a teacher. William Pandawa was appointed an Auxiliary Board Member for the area and was a tower of strength for his people. Counsellor Naraqi also

helped to establish an aid post providing medical services currently funded by the Department of Health.

Another growth area opened to the Faith during this period was in the Western Province. Along the rivers and in the swamps communities formed amongst the Dogadala people in Balimo and in the Morehead District. The people of this area experienced the establishment of Christianity by a Mission that manifested an intolerant attitude to the culture of the people; they banned the traditional customs, their drums, the carvings, and the dancing.
In one of the communities in Morehead a story emerged about an elder who dreamed of a Holy Person with a white beard, wearing a white cloak and a white turban. In the dream the man said to the elder be ready for a new message that would awaken his people. He also said two visitors from another country would come and teach them many things. When the elder awoke, he told his brothers about his dream and advised them to move to another island out of the reach of the mission to prepare themselves. One of the descendants of these men, Dabrani Isamu, worked in Lae as a technical expert for the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. He visited the Baha'i Centre with an American Pioneer David Schreiber who also worked in the same department. When Dabrani saw the enlarged photo of Abdu'l-Baha on the wall in the Centre he believed he was the Holy Man of his Uncle's dream and immediately became a believer. He returned home to his island of Kautru and hearing his story they recognised the Faith had been the subject of the old man's dream and they all became Baha'is.

Men in Kautru with their Kundus celebrating the opening of their Baha'i Centre 1988

The National Assembly in 1987 in Lae – Herman Korus, Margaret Bluett, Paul Bluett, Erama Ugaia, David Hall, Oppsy Kora, Ramu Sannyasi, Silan Nadarajah and Bob Napoli.

The assembly members elected in 1987 were eligible to attend the International Convention to be held in Haifa in 1988 and plans were made to allow all of them to travel to Israel.

Members of the National Assembly in Haifa 1988 - Back Row: David Hall, Fo'ad Taeed, Paul Bluett, Herman Korus, Erama Ugaia Front Row: Oppsy Kora, Margaret Bluett, Bob Napoli.

During 1987 Silan Nadarajah left PNG and his place was taken by Fo'ad Taeed. I presume Ramu Sannyasi took this photo in Haifa as he is also absent. The International Convention was an inspiring event and PNG gained a lot of attention that year because Bob Napoli from Nondugal brought his singsing regalia and wore it during the election of the House of Justice. It seemed to him everyone attending the convention wanted to have their photo taken with him, he was such a colourful figure in all his feathers. He may have been the first Highlander to wear their cultural costume in Israel and he was impressed with the attention he received both from Baha'is and passers-by.

When Bob returned home he began to think about his experiences in Haifa and decided to form a dance group and take them to Australia confident it would gain as much attention as successful as he did in Israel. He asked the National Assembly for help, but as most of the men in his group were not believers it was not considered to be a Baha'i sponsored journey. However, Bob was undeterred and the group paid all their own travel expenses.
The Baha'is in North Queensland looked after them and truly a group of Highlanders was an unusual experience for those involved. Bob became inactive in the Faith after that trip which didn't surprise me. That experience repeated what I had noticed with other village people when we took them to overseas to a Baha'i event. It happened to Tamun when Rodney took him to the Conference in Australia in 1967 and I took Peta from Arufa to same International event. They both found it difficult to settle down to their lives back in the village. It is unwise to introduce a way of life to people who are not able to continue it. It doesn't necessarily inspire them it can make them dissatisfied with their own world. In Tamun's case after about seven years he became involved again but without his initial enthusiasm. Peta just wanted to stay in Australia and when she grew up she found a man who could provide her with an expatriate life style but she never became involved with Baha'i activities. In Bob's case, even though we didn't see much of him again the future of the Faith in Nondugal, twenty-eight years later, would have surprised us all.
In 2016 Derek Smith sent me a copy of a report of a youth seminar in Nondugal, written by Kevin Penge to Counsellor Kesia Aisoli, which brought tears to my eyes. The enthusiasm with which it was written, the remarkable use of English and the fact the youth organised it themselves is truly amazing to me because when I knew the people they were illiterate and lived a subsistence way of life and relied on outsiders to organise their events. I just had to include a passage from Kevin's report: -

"The themes selected for study at the seminar were the 2016 Ridvan Message, book 5 and its field books. "It was really good and exciting moment for every one of us, especially highlands regions. many of the participants are animators, coordinators and active animators who were coming from adjoining clusters. The total number of (41) participants who all have gathered in Nondugal cluster (Kaming) many of whom are new faces, too energetic, having great potential and full of Hope, mostly youth. The gathering filled us with over flowing joy and full of laughter that, now, uplift the spiritual environment for everyone to learn and explore the profound knowledge of the junior youth spiritual environment program."

Another area which has experienced exceptional growth in the number of believers is Kimbe in New Britain. The original believers in the region lived on the Kombe islands and suffered from restrictions placed on them when they became Baha'is by the Catholic Mission. The Mission controlled all the services in the region, such as medical assistance, education, and mail deliveries. The village people who became believers were denied use of any of these facilities; this meant the entire population of Makati Island. This began to change when Rodney Hancock moved to Kimbe and

established several businesses, including Linga plantation which contained the only airstrip in the region. Rodney also purchased a trading vessel which eased the problem of arriving on the islands, a motorised boat is a lot easier to use than a canoe.

The situation for the Kombe people improved even more when a believer from Malaysia, Chua Tek We, and his family, moved to the Kimbe area. Chua was appointed the manager of the plantation which straddled the Talasea peninsula. His role included management of the only local trade store and post office in the area which meant the Catholic Fathers who lived there needed to be friendly to the Baha'is. Luckily by this time the priests were all local men happy to associate in friendship with the Baha'is especially expatriate ones. This brought a change in fortune to the friends and it is hard to imagine the relief I felt at the changes which had occurred since 1969 I noticed when I visited the area in 1983 and travelled on Rodney's boat to Makati Island to help the women develop a project to help improve their lives. Imagine my surprise after several days of consultation all they wanted was a basketball court. It was easy to send them some rings for the posts. If only all development projects were that simple?

A visit to Lae from Counsellor Joy Stevenson pictured here with friends including some National Assembly members and Chua Tek We, the Manager of the Talasea Plantation.
Circa 1985: Paul Bluett, Silan Nadarajah, unknown, Joy Stevenson, Amino Bale, Erama Ugaia, Chua Tek We, Ramus Sanyasi, Margaret Bluett and Steven Wima.

The rapid growth of the Faith in the eighties saw a change in the appointment of the number of delegates. The size of the communities now determined the number rather than each local assembly having one delegate. The number of delegates to Convention increased and in 1987 the overflow of delegates had to be accommodated in a hostel.
During the eighties, the National Assembly focussed on sponsoring Institutes bringing believers from different areas, to a central place where they could be deepened in the teachings and return home to deepen believers in their areas. It was also decided it would beneficial if delegates could be encouraged to stay on for another week for an institute and attend classes on different subjects such as laws, history, and development projects. Emphasis was placed on women's activities and involving them in the administrative and community events.
The Convention in 1989 was attended by Counsellor Peter Vuyiya, a member of the International Teaching Centre from Africa. He was an inspirational visitor for the friends as they identified with him as he shared a similar personal history to PNG people. After the Convention Counsellor Dr. Naraqi organised a conference for Auxiliary Board members and some of the friends to meet with Peter Vuyiya in Goroka. This left Lae short of pioneers to conduct deepening classes but it had an interesting result. When a vacuum occurs, the friends surprise you.

The Institute used the delegates themselves to organise the classes and it was surprising how it brought out all kinds of skills including consultation abilities. It

was a beneficial exercise in teaching believers to give voice to their ideas and how to organise discussions on spiritual matters rather than relying on others. One of the issues for people in any kind of community without appointed ministers is to find the strength and courage to speak out and give voice to the gems of wisdom they all possess and to convince them they can organise their own events without assistance.

The Conference in Goroka in 1989 with member of the International Teaching Centre from Africa Counsellor Peter Vuyiya

In 1990 at the National Convention in Lae three pioneer members of the National Assembly were replaced by local believers. This change was an indication of the growing maturity of the Papua New Guinea community. It may have come as a shock to some people including me, but changes can lead to positive outcomes providing an opportunity for growth and the acquisition of new skills. I was no longer Secretary of the National Assembly but It meant I could travel more and help with elections and focus on learning to be a writer something I had always wanted to do.

Due to teaching by local friends and some visitors a few small communities were established in the Sepik areas of Wewak and Maprik. Small institutes were held in those areas. Mark Vloeberghs was active in this work and effective due to his interest in unlocking the meanings relevant to the Faith found in the Christian beliefs and prophecies. Noel Bluett was also familiar with Bible Prophecies that interested the people given their general knowledge of Christian teachings and belief in the necessity for a Bible.

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Village Institute in the Sepik attended by Mark Vloeberghs, Sister Vi Hoenke, Noel and Margaret Bluett

My husband and I left Papua New Guinea in 1992 to return to Australia but retain vivid memories of our time in the country and feel privileged to have been there to participate in the establishment and growth of the Faith during our 28 years. Some members of our family still live in PNG and we visit regularly thus maintaining our connections with the country we love. A fitting conclusion to these memoirs is a quote by Professor Graham Hassall.
“In addition to Papua New Guinea being a rapidly growing Baha’i community, it is geographically dispersed: by 1991 there were Communities in 87 of the country's 88 districts, at least 3 LSAs in each of its 19 provinces, and a total of 259 LSAs nation-wide: in that year 61 of 76 delegates attended National Convention, and an additional 12 forwarded postal votes. In addition to this numeric expansion the Papua New Guinea Baha’i Faith enjoys considerable exposure in the national press, and is well known to the country's political leaders.” Graham Hassall

4

1993

Five Boys, No Girls — and an April Fool

The arrival of Eliot, our fifth son, in Rabaul in 1993.

ALPHA AND OMEGA

Yesterday would have been my 50th wedding anniversary. I am remarried, but fifty years is fifty years, so I rang Ione to mark the occasion.

Our fifth son, Eliot, had taken his mother on a trip to New Zealand, so I got the skinny. And, as these things do, the conversation sent me back 33 years.

Ione had once said to me, “I have some news.”

“You’re pregnant?”

“Yes.”

Unplanned. Rather like the first one. Apparently after four children we still hadn’t worked out what caused them.

The drive from Rabaul to Vunapope Hospital was about 25 kilometres, so naturally I decided what we needed was a faster car. Aren’t men stupid? With a volcano coming, I should have kept the 4WD Isuzu Trooper.

Instead I bought a Mitsubishi Magna, alloy head, 1.8 litres, and discovered I could get it up to 180 km/h coming down the Vulcan stretch.

Vulcan, incidentally, was eventually blown apart and the road disappeared in the 1994 eruption. I drove over the rebuilt section yesterday. It only took “them” 32 years to fix it. In PNG terms, practically overnight.

By baby number five we had apparently worn out the German nuns at Vunapope and got a Kiwi doctor instead, straight as a die.

Eliot Patrick Bluett arrived just after midnight on 1 April 1993.

“Any chance we could put 31 March on the birth certificate? Poor kid will have an April Fool’s birthday for the rest of his life.”

“Nah.”

So April Fool he became.

The town had been taking bets on the gender. No ultrasounds in those days, certainly no gender-reveal parties. If there had been, after four boys we would probably have needed a very large supply of blue balloons.

In the middle of the night I picked up our birthing partner, Jenny Crosse. Yes, we were a bit modern. But no, despite the circumstances, I did not do 180 over Vulcan.

Boy number five arrived safely.

John Mills took one look into the bassinet and pronounced, “He will be benevolent.”

Remarkably, he was right.

At Sacred Heart Eliot had a little white friend, Rosie Alexander, born on Valentine’s Day. We took her to Kaivuna on her birthday—something resembling a first date, except with parents as chaperones. Her family owned the Hamamas Hotel and she was accustomed to eating there for free. When we ordered, she looked at us innocently and asked:

“Do you have to pay for this?”

There are moments when children remind you that everyone’s normal is different.

Then came the volcano.

The ash became so bad we took Eliot out of school for a term. At Paluat he played with the village kids, ate fried fish on the beach and made an unsuccessful attempt to raise a baby leatherback turtle.

Years later I took him to the famous Jumbo Floating Restaurant in Hong Kong. Down into the bowels of the boat we went, where you chose your live fish from a tank. Great ceremony followed. Eventually the cooked fish arrived beneath a silver dome.

I waited for the verdict.

“Well?”

Eliot considered it carefully.

“Tastes the same as the fish on the beach at home.”

Thousands of kilometres, Hong Kong, a floating restaurant, live fish selected from a tank, silver dome—and Paluat won.

I was deflated.

He was merely candid.

By then, with five boys in a row, I had also made a rather important financial decision: I was not going to spend my life worrying about how I would pay five sets of school fees, boarding fees and airfares.

God had me in the palm of His hand. Somehow we would manage.

Five boys in a row seemed worth celebrating. I bought K80 worth of cigars, went down to the Rabaul Yacht Club, rang the bell and shouted the bar.

A somewhat expensive way of announcing that the Bluett family had once again failed to produce a girl.

But Eliot was handsome, good-natured and benevolent, just as John Mills had predicted.

The formula still worked.

I have since gone on to acquire another five children, bringing the total to ten.

But that is another story.

Yesterday, on the 50th anniversary of where this whole adventure began, I couldn’t help thinking: five boys, a volcano, countless school fees, one ill-advised Mitsubishi Magna and a great many miles later, perhaps God really did have us in the palm of His hand.

1993

Golf club

Clubs

The Rabaul Golf Club once approached me with what they considered a simple community service assignment.

“Paul,” they said, “could you help us get a donated set of golf clubs off the boat without paying duty?”

Now there are moments in life when a man should pause and reflect on the words customs agent, duty, and boss of customs all appearing in the same sentence.

This was apparently not one of those moments.

So down to the wharf I went, collected the clubs, slid them into the boot of the car and drove straight out the gate wearing the expression of a man who believed he was performing an act of public charity.

Unfortunately Customs took a rather old-fashioned view of the matter and insisted on classifying it as something closer to “importation” than “community service.”

To make matters worse, the boss of Customs and I had previously enjoyed what diplomats would describe as “a deterioration in bilateral relations” which eventually resulted in him being shown the door. The remaining Customs officers, displaying remarkable solidarity and teamwork, decided this would be an excellent opportunity for revenge.

Before long I was in court.

The menu of possible outcomes was not encouraging:

* Jail time.
* Loss of my customs agent licence.
* Public humiliation.
* Having to explain to my mother what exactly I had been thinking.

Enter David, patron saint of lost causes, unpaid invoices and people who should really know better.

Through a combination of clever lawyering, obscure legal principles and what I suspect was outright sorcery, David managed to get me off.

The judge was satisfied.

David was satisfied.

I was extremely satisfied.

The Rabaul Golf Club was relieved.

Customs was less enthusiastic.

One important lesson emerged from the entire affair:

Nobody ever asked me to smuggle sporting equipment again.

To this day, whenever I see a set of golf clubs, I instinctively check for witnesses, Customs officers and available legal representation.

1993

Ireland

Ireland

BLUETTS IN IRELAND: THE ANCESTORS WHO MAY NOT HAVE WANTED TO BE FOUND

Based on my mother Margaret Bluett’s account of her travels with my father, Noel, in 1994—with a few observations from the Papua New Guinea branch of the family.

I have spent much of my life in Papua New Guinea, where discovering how everybody is related can take an entire afternoon and leave you with more relatives than you started with.

Apparently, Ireland operates on much the same system.

In 1994, Mum and Dad returned to Ireland to investigate the origins of Dad’s grandfather, Patrick Bluett. They crossed from England by car ferry, armed with curiosity, a surname and the optimistic belief that somebody would know something.

Somebody did.

Unfortunately, the next person knew something different.

Mum recorded the adventure, and I am grateful she did. Without her account, we might have inherited only a vague connection to Ireland and a possible interest in cattle.

Instead, we inherited priests, missing boys, disputed identities, a family scandal and enough conflicting evidence to keep several generations occupied.

A proper family history, in other words.

Their first move was to telephone Tony Bluett in Clonakilty. Their previous reception had apparently fallen some distance short of the celebrated Irish welcome.

This time, however, Tony invited them to dinner at his club.

What had changed?

Mum had written about their earlier experience in the Women’s Weekly.

The article had reached the Bluetts.

Tony had been spoken to.

Having spent years in PNG, I recognise this process immediately. You can ignore an individual complaint, but once the extended family gets involved, the matter becomes considerably more urgent.

Tony’s invitation was effectively a family-directed hospitality recovery programme.

Before dinner, Mum and Dad visited a music shop and had a long conversation with the owner. Mum concluded that the Irish loved to talk if they found a good audience.

This was encouraging. Dad was also very fond of a conversation, particularly one involving family history, religion or the possibility that we were descended from Vikings.

The challenge would be finding somebody prepared to listen.

At dinner, Tony suggested they visit Ballyshonigan, near Limerick, where he had grown up on a dairy farm.

Someone there might know about the family.

They found a tiny settlement: a crossroads pub, a few houses and farmland. Outside a prosperous-looking farmhouse, a young man was getting into his car.

They approached him.

“We’re looking for the Bluetts.”

He laughed.

“Everyone in this place is a Bluett.”

In PNG, this would be the moment you discovered you had been asking for “uncle” without specifying which one.

The young man was on his way to golf, but first took them inside to meet his parents, Maura and Tom Bluett.

Maura looked at Dad and immediately announced:

“You look exactly like Uncle Tom!”

This was a promising development. After travelling halfway around the world, Dad had been recognised as somebody else.

Uncle Tom had unfortunately died, which limited the possibility of a direct comparison, but lunch was offered and the investigation proceeded.

There was family talk, followed by tea and sponge cake. Whatever uncertainty surrounded the ancestry, the catering was beyond dispute.

Maura then directed them to two retired nuns.

Uncle Willy was visiting them, she said, and he knew all about the family history.

Now they were getting somewhere.

In PNG, every family has somebody who knows the whole story: who married whom, who owns which land, why two branches no longer speak and what really happened to the truck.

In Ireland, this person appeared to be Uncle Willy.

When Mum and Dad mentioned the mysterious two boys who had left Ireland, Willy recognised the story.

“They were old Uncle Dick’s boys.”

And then came the words every family historian secretly hopes to hear:

“It was a family disgrace.”

Much more interesting than discovering an ancestor had kept excellent accounts and attended church regularly.

According to Willy, the affair had been covered up long ago. He had heard about it from his father, and the family land was at Baggotstown.

Before leaving, he arranged for a man called George to come and help. George had been to Australia and might be better equipped to communicate with these distant visitors.

Meanwhile, Dad explained our supposed Viking origins to the two nuns.

They listened politely. Photographs were produced. Dad continued.

Eventually George arrived and revealed that the sisters could not understand a word Mum and Dad were saying.

Dad had delivered an entire ancestral presentation to an appreciative audience who had understood none of it.

I have sat through meetings where I suspected something similar, although usually everyone claimed to be speaking English.

To be fair, Mum and Dad had struggled to understand the sisters too. Between them, they had achieved a warm family reunion with very little exchange of usable information.

They did learn of a family of eleven children in which one son inherited the farm and the others entered the Church: the girls became nuns and the other boys priests.

That certainly simplified succession planning.

In our family, with its long association with PNG and the Bahá’í Faith, we tended to send people off to faraway places. This Irish branch seemed to have supplied its surplus children directly to the Catholic Church.

Different arrangements, but neither left much opportunity for a quiet family life.

With Baggotstown established as a lead, Mum and Dad went looking for professional assistance in Limerick.

Through wind, rain and narrow muddy roads, they eventually reached a genealogy office in a beautifully restored granary.

Inside were computers, busy staff and the reassuring appearance of people who might actually know what they were doing.

The archivist, Dr S. C. Mahoney, explained that parish records had only been entered into the system during the previous six years. Had they come earlier, the information would not have been available.

Ancestral research, it seemed, required good timing as well as dead relatives.

Mum recorded that he also told them he had been defrocked for using Church records to help people trace their families.

“Don’t tell anyone you got this information from me,” he warned, “or they won’t help you.”

By now the search had acquired the atmosphere of an undercover operation.

They had crossed the Irish Sea looking for Grandfather and were receiving confidential briefings in a converted granary.

Baggotstown brought up a promising trail. There were records of Bluetts there from 1822, a Patrick Bluett married to Julia McMahon, and a large family that included a Richard.

Richard, in turn, had children including a Patrick whose age appeared potentially consistent with Dad’s grandfather.

Potentially was the important word.

Our Patrick had married Margaret Carey in Gisborne, New Zealand, in 1879. Ages and details in later records wandered about enough to suggest that accuracy had not always been his main concern.

For an accountant such as me, this is deeply irritating.

One can forgive an ancestor many things. Inconsistent supporting documents are another matter.

Dr Mahoney directed them to Father John Joseph Bluett, living in a nursing home for priests in Limerick.

When they arrived, he greeted them with a smile.

“Why did you take so long to visit me? I have been waiting for you.”

Word had travelled ahead.

Again, very PNG. You arrive somewhere thinking you are making an unexpected visit and discover that three villages already know where you had lunch.

Father John Joseph was jovial, welcoming and well informed about Tony's earlier performance.

"He was constipated on your first visit, wasn't he?"

A memorable diagnosis of inadequate hospitality.

Dad was suffering from flu, and the priest insisted they move to a hotel he recommended and consider themselves his guests. He felt obliged to make up for Tony.

The family reputation was being restored one meal and hotel room at a time.

Then he told them the story of Baggotstown.

According to his account, the mother had died and the father, Richard—old Uncle Dick—had begun drinking heavily, making life miserable for the children.

The boys retaliated by driving cattle to Charleville market, and one disappeared with the proceeds.

This was becoming a more adventurous ancestry than we had anticipated.

After years in business in PNG, I have encountered plenty of complicated explanations involving missing money. It was slightly unsettling to find a possible example waiting in the family tree.

The boys' disappearance was supposedly concealed. People were told the eldest had died.

The farm eventually passed through the son John to his sister Honoria, who married a McAuliffe. The land remained, but the surname on the gate changed.

Father John Joseph also gave Dad photographs, including one of his grandfather James Bluett, born in 1844.

James looked rather severe, although this was attributed to the photograph having come from a glass negative.

A useful excuse. Some of our older family photographs could also benefit from that explanation.

The priest then directed them to Honoria's daughter Nan, by then in her nineties and living with family in Limerick.

More welcomes followed, then another contact: William McAuliffe in Rochestown, Cork.

Another Willy.

Family research becomes much harder when everybody has been named after everybody else.

Willy McAuliffe was enthusiastic, generous and interested in history. He supplied maps, photographs and stories, including accounts of his father’s involvement with Michael Collins during the Irish War of Independence.

Mum and Dad had gone looking for a grandfather and found themselves among cattle scandals, priests and revolutionary history.

Willy took them to Emly and the burial ground where members of the Bluett family lay. His wife Mary cooked them dinner. They met more relatives and visited the old farm at Baggotstown.

There was the crumbling house, the farmland and the Morning Star River running behind it.

That part moves me.

Having spent much of my life in PNG, I understand that an old house and a piece of land can hold far more than their physical value. They hold the lives of people who worked there, raised children there, argued there and expected, perhaps, that their family would always remain.

Our branch had somehow travelled from Ireland through New Zealand and Australia, and eventually into the Highlands and islands of Papua New Guinea.

From the Morning Star River to places no Irish ancestor could reasonably have imagined.

At the farm, Richard McAuliffe took Mum and Dad aside.

“What do you want here?”

An excellent question, especially when strangers arrive showing an unusually detailed interest in your ancestors and property.

They quickly assured him they wanted only to discover where Dad’s grandfather came from.

No claim on the farm. No retrospective demand for cattle.

Richard became a friend and corresponded with them for years. Relatives visited Cairns, including several Father Bluetts.

Dad had been raised Catholic but became a Bahá’í at eighteen. Mum found the priests open-minded and unconcerned about his change of faith.

After all the uncertainty over who belonged to whom, it was lovely that religion did not become another obstacle.

Then, just as the story appeared to be settling into place, further research arrived.

Peter Bluett, from the Melbourne branch, began examining the Australian and New Zealand records.

The details did not fit comfortably.

He contacted Willy McAuliffe, who reconsidered the evidence and concluded that Mum and Dad had attached themselves to the wrong Patrick.

Willy wrote Mum a three-page letter explaining the errors.

Three pages is a substantial correction. This was no minor adjustment to a birth date.

Dad, however, remained convinced.

So did Willy's older brother Richard, who asked a reasonable question:

What had happened to the Patrick from Baggotstown?

He had been baptised, but Richard could find no later record or gravestone accounting for him.

Had he died? Disappeared? Emigrated?

Or become our Patrick, quietly starting again on the other side of the world?

The available evidence did not settle it.

And our Patrick was not helping.

According to the family account, he gave varying information about himself, claimed to have had a dairy farm in Auckland and later moved the family to Melbourne.

His occupations appeared differently on different documents: labourer, chimney sweep, bricklayer.

He also drank heavily and disappeared at intervals, leaving Margaret to manage the children.

She bore nine, of whom only four survived to adulthood: Daniel, Margaret, Joseph and Francis, my grandfather.

Behind the entertaining mystery sits that much harder story: a woman raising children through loss, uncertainty and an unreliable husband.

Patrick's death certificate in Sale, Victoria, attributed his heart failure to excessive alcohol use.

Whatever remained uncertain about his birthplace, the ending was painfully clear.

Mum's final position was sensible. Much of the Irish story had come through priests recounting old family memories. One account was said to have been passed on at a deathbed, in case descendants ever returned.

Those descendants had returned.

Whether they had found the right family remained unresolved.

Dad believed they had. Willy believed they had not. Richard thought the missing Patrick still needed explaining.

Mum preserved the evidence, the doubts and the wonderful human adventure of it all.

For that, I owe her a great deal.

She and Dad went looking for certainty and came home with friendships, photographs, letters, hospitality and a story that still refuses to sit quietly in its file.

From my end of the family, after a lifetime in PNG, it all feels strangely familiar: land, family loyalties, oral history, missing records and several confident people giving different versions of the same event.

I would love to know exactly who Patrick Bluett was.

But I also rather like the thought of Mum and Dad following one introduction after another across Ireland, being welcomed into parlours, fed sponge cake, redirected to another cousin and gradually discovering that ancestry is as much about the living as the dead.

And if Patrick really did sell the cattle and vanish with the money, he was remarkably successful.

More than a century later, his family was still trying to get an explanation.

1993

Px birth

Twins

Sometime in the last millennium, I boarded a flight from Port Moresby to Rabaul expecting the usual service: something to eat, something to drink and, ideally, arrival in Rabaul.

I got considerably more involved than that.

I was in the last row when a lady slumped to the floor outside the toilet. At first she appeared to be sick. Then the hosties began racing up and down the aisle with an urgency that suggested we had moved well beyond the sick-bag stage.

A baby was coming.

The passengers beside the action were sent forward, and I was evicted too. By the time I reached the front, every spare seat had been taken, so I ended up sitting in the forward galley.

The captain announced we were returning to Port Moresby. Most passengers had no idea why. Everyone looked concerned, and quite a few were watching me.

Meanwhile, I was watching a tray of orange juice.

I was thirsty. But helping myself while a medical emergency unfolded down the back seemed a little self-centred.

A strategy began to form.

If I gave EVERYONE a drink, surely nobody could begrudge me one?

Entirely self-serving, I admit, but dressed up beautifully as public service.

So I picked up the tray and started serving orange juice. This caused considerable hilarity and broke the tension, although it did nothing to explain why we were going back to Port Moresby or why a passenger had apparently joined the cabin crew.

On my return journey, collecting the empty cups, we hit turbulence.

I dropped a few.

More laughter. My brief career in aviation hospitality was already attracting reviews.

Back in Port Moresby, mother and baby were taken off to an ambulance.

Then came the twist.

Twins!

The second baby was born in the ambulance. Apparently, having delivered one at altitude, Mum had decided to complete the set at ground level.

The rest of us waited in the hot sun on the tarmac while the cabin floor was cleaned. One of the hosties, who had St John Ambulance training and had helped with the delivery, explained that she couldn’t serve food on the next flight because she hadn’t yet been properly disinfected.

A staffing shortage.

Fortunately, an experienced orange-juice attendant was standing nearby.

Also thirsty again.

I offered my already proven services, and sure enough, after take-off she called me up. This time I helped serve the food in the galley.

I had bought a ticket to Rabaul and somehow acquired a shift.

The national newspaper later ran a competition to name the babies. My suggestion was “Papua” and “New Guinea”, on the grounds that one had been born in each.

A memorable flight. Two babies delivered, several cups dropped, and one passenger promoted from the last row to catering.

I never did find out whether I qualified for frequent flyer points or wages.

Told this story before but it’s so png I couldn’t resist telling again

1994

Volcano climb

And then it erupted

Volcano

January 1995. The volcano was still erupting.

Most sensible people looked at Tavurvur and said, “Let’s stay a long way away from that.”

My German business partner Jurgen and I looked at it and said, “Let’s climb it.”

To be fair, this may explain a lot about our subsequent reputations.

We took one of our tugs across the harbour and landed near the base. The volcano was actively erupting, the rocks were sharp, hot and unstable, and for additional excitement we had brought a few of our children. Julian, aged seven, was the standout participant in what today would probably be described as a child protection training video.

In those days cameras used film. Young people may need to Google this. A camera would suddenly stop taking photos and you had to decide whether fate was speaking to you or whether you simply needed another roll.

After a hard climb we reached the summit area. Fumes drifted around us like a fog machine at a rock concert. The ground was warm beneath our feet and every now and then the volcano would remind us who owned the property.

I checked my camera.

“Jurgen,” I said, “my film has run out. I think that’s a sign we should go back.”

He looked at me.

“Do you have another roll?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s a sign we should stay.”

German logic. Difficult to argue with.

At that precise moment Julian took off screaming down what turned out to be a dead-end crevasse.

Then the earth shook.

Not metaphorically. Actually shook.

The mountain gave a rumble, the ground moved and suddenly a shower of rocks launched into the air.

I dropped to my knees, hunched my back and waited for the inevitable.

Then, in one of the least successful defensive manoeuvres in history, I looked up, saw a rock coming towards me and instinctively raised my hand as if to tell it to stop.

The rock ignored my instructions.

It clipped my finger, leaving a small graze and a very large lesson in the limitations of human authority.

I was shaking like a leaf.

Meanwhile my seven-year-old son was still disappearing into a volcanic crevasse.

Parental instincts finally overcame scientific curiosity and I sprinted after him, retrieved him from his chosen route to oblivion and announced that perhaps we had collected enough data for one day.

We returned to town, developed the film and produced multiple copies of the photographs.

The photos were spectacular.

The reaction from the townsfolk was even better.

Any lingering doubts they had about Jurgen and me vanished completely.

Climbing an erupting volcano was one thing.

Taking children with us elevated the exercise from adventurous to certifiable.

Today, of course, we carry smartphones.

No film.

No spare rolls.

No difficult decisions about whether fate is sending us a message.

And sadly, no convenient signs telling us when it is time to leave an erupting volcano.

The funny thing is that the volcano, the rocks and the fumes weren’t the most dangerous part of the expedition. It was two businessmen interpreting camera film as divine guidance.

1994

Jason escapes volcano

No school today

The Weirdest Holiday Ever

By Jason Bluett, age 9

It was getting dark and a big earthquake frightened me. My younger brother Julian said, “Don’t worry.” That was not very helpful because the ground was still shaking.

We left Rabaul and went to our friends’ house at Nonga Palawat. Lots of people were sleeping outside on the deck. I woke up the next morning and suddenly remembered I hadn’t done my homework. Then I looked over the trees and saw a giant ash cloud shooting into the sky.

Excellent.

No school.

Dad loaded mattresses and sheets into the back of the truck and off we went. The roads were full of people walking. We stopped and some children climbed into the truck. I thought they were supposed to be there. I even saw a lady waving at us from the side of the road, but I was nine and assumed she was just being friendly.

Then dirt started landing on my head.

Then in my eyes.

Then I realised the dirt was falling from the sky.

Ten of us hid under one mattress. It was crowded. Somebody’s elbow was in my ear and somebody else’s foot was probably in my face.

Then it started raining.

The truck stopped because of some fuel problem. Kua, our nanny, looked at all of us covered in ash and said, “Now we all look grey.”

We reached a river and jumped in to wash off. Dad lost his glasses. Young Andrew somehow found them again. I still think that was magic.

When we got to the harbour, everything started feeling like a strange holiday. About sixty people were staying there. The staff slept in a giant copra shed while we slept in a house. We ran through cocoa plantations, jumped off the wharf and generally had a great time.

The only strange thing was Dad.

Normally Dad was calm about everything, but he kept counting children.

One, two, three, four…

Then counting again.

Apparently some extra children had climbed into the truck and accidentally joined our family evacuation.

Dad’s barge arrived after being diverted and brought supplies. We got cracker biscuits and warm Coke. If you’re nine years old, warm Coke is still Coke.

At night we sat on a mound overlooking the harbour and watched lightning flash over the volcano. It looked like the world’s biggest fireworks display, except nobody was cheering.

Then we heard Mobil was sending a private jet to rescue us.

A private jet!

I imagined leather seats, movie stars and maybe free ice cream.

When we got to the airport, it turned out not to be that kind of private jet.

Very disappointing.

I saw my Dragon teacher, Mrs Linder, there. I have never seen a teacher so happy to be leaving school.

We flew to Lae where my Aunty Kaity gave me a gigantic hug. This was embarrassing because we weren’t that close.

Then her son Sean suggested I talk to the Post-Courier. Outside Lae International Hotel, just as I was trying to look important for the newspaper, Sean suddenly kissed me on the cheek.

At school afterwards my friends never forgot.

Volcanoes erupt.

Cities evacuate.

Ash falls from the sky.

But apparently the most newsworthy thing that happened during the entire disaster was Sean kissing me at the hotel

1994

Tv star

Hi

The Day I Became a Television Star (Against My Will)

Volcanologist Peter Lowenstein’s report wasn’t exactly cheerful. It said that if the eruption developed into a full caldera event, the only place likely to survive was Put Put. Naturally, the map showing Put Put was buried somewhere in the report, but we found it and headed there.

We had been in Put Put for three days when Mobil chartered a flight into Tokua’s brand-new dirt strip to evacuate the women and children. Off went Ione, 39 my ex , Jason aged 9, Julian aged 7, and Elliot, all 17 months of him. They joined a collection of evacuees and stayed with friends in Kimbe and Lae.

Then a Hercules landed and out stepped none other than Sean Dorney from the ABC.

“How do I get to town?” he asked.

I looked him squarely in the eye.

“They’re not letting journalists in. Let me do the talking. And you only report what you actually see. No sensationalising.”

To his credit, he agreed.

We threw a canvas over the camera and set off.

On the way they interviewed me about the five children I had rescued and was still caring for. One was still bottle-fed. They asked me to do the interview again. And again. And again.

Five takes.

Five times I became emotional.

That was when it started.

The journalists couldn’t believe their luck. They thought they’d found a man who could cry on cue.

I couldn’t believe my bad luck. I realised I was permanently emotionally damaged.

At the north coast checkpoint, where we were heading to open the Mobil fuel terminal and get fuel for the town, the journalists sat quietly in the back. Meanwhile, standing at the checkpoint was none other than the legendary Ray Martin.

Sean waved cheerfully as we drove through.

Ray looked confused.

We continued to the wharf where a metre-thick blanket of floating pumice covered the harbour.

I stepped out, dipped my foot in the water and announced:

“I declare this harbour open.”

No one had actually asked me to do that, but it seemed like the sort of thing a managing director should say during a volcanic catastrophe.

Then we drove to our house.

Or rather, where our house used to be.

It had collapsed.

“I can’t live here.”

“How do you feel?” asked the microphone immediately appearing in front of my face.

At that exact moment a cry came from nearby.

“A lady was stuck in the mud! “

Our dog Lady was buried up to her hips in fine ash.

Canine vs human confusion

We dug her out but she was in too much pain to move.

I opened tins of fish with a machete and fed the surviving cat, Taki, while the surviving dog, Tramp, joined our convoy.

Tramp’s contribution to the disaster response was to throw up spectacularly on Sean Dorney’s lap.

The smell was unforgettable.

The journalists had a plane to catch.

We headed towards Tunnel Hill and Pila Pila. Earlier we’d seen where a volcanologist’s vehicle had been washed out to sea. As we drove, I noticed water seeping out among the banana trees.

“We need high ground.”

My passengers looked sceptical.

We pulled up behind a brick trade store.

Seconds later, WHOOSH!

A wall of muddy water came roaring past. Sea water thrown up by Vulcan had formed a mud dam which suddenly burst. Six-foot waves of volcanic sludge thundered down the road.

The journalists stared at us with newfound respect.

“How did you know?”

Truthfully, I wasn’t entirely sure.

Years in PNG had taught me that when the volcano is active and the banana trees start leaking, it’s probably time to move.

Then it was a race to the airport.

My German partner in one vehicle, me in the other.

The journalists spent the entire trip worrying about their cameras.

Not their lives.

Just the cameras.

They caught their flight to Kavieng and somehow uploaded the footage by satellite.

The next day, driving to my new Kokopo office, a friend leaned out his car window.

“You’re a star!”

Apparently the footage had gone everywhere.

My kids saw it.

Relatives in Tasmania saw it.

People heard me on the radio.

And when the commentators discussed the way I was driving, friends immediately recognised me.

“That’s Paul.”

After years of business, accounting, fuel distribution and crisis management, my greatest claim to fame turned out to be crying on television, declaring a pumice-filled harbour open, rescuing a dog from volcanic ash, and having a vomiting dog ruin an ABC journalist’s trousers.

Not exactly the career plan I had in mind.

1994

The fuel man

And the volcano ABC visits



Sean Dorney

SEAN DORNEY, THE VOLCANO — AND THE FUEL MAN

I first properly crossed paths with Sean Dorney in the middle of the 1994 Rabaul volcanic eruption.

It was hardly an ideal setting for making friends.

I was at Tokua Airport putting my women and children on a Mobil charter flight to safety when a Hercules arrived. Out stepped Sean Dorney and his ABC crew, cameras and microphones at the ready.

I saw Sean and immediately castigated him over some of the ABC's reporting of the eruption.

"Sub-editors!" was his defence.

An unbelievable assertion, of course. Apparently journalists wrote everything perfectly and mysterious people called sub-editors were responsible for anything I didn't like.

Then, having endured my lecture on responsible journalism, Sean had the nerve to ask me how he could get into Rabaul.

“As a journalist, you won’t,” I told him. “With me, you will. I’m the fuel guy.”

There was just one condition.

“Don’t bloody sensationalise it!”

“Okay, okay.”

We covered the ABC cameras under a sail, loaded everyone into the four-wheel drives and set off in convoy with my crazy German partner, Jurgen.

At Pila Pila we came across a checkpoint. Ray Martin and some Japanese journalists had been stopped and weren’t being allowed through.

We didn’t stop.

We were the fuel people.

As we sailed past, Sean couldn’t resist waving cheerfully out the back window of my ute at his stranded journalistic colleagues.

There are few things more satisfying than being a famous television journalist — except perhaps being a fuel man during a volcanic eruption.

Our first stop was the Mobil depot. The mountain was roaring away in the background.

Then we headed to the wharf.

The harbour was buried under pumice, perhaps three feet deep in places. With the ABC cameras rolling, I ceremoniously pushed my foot through the pumice until I found water underneath.

I made my official pronouncement:

“The harbour is open!”

I had no authority whatsoever to open harbours, but nobody else seemed to be doing it.

Next stop was my house.

Except we couldn’t drive there.

The road was blocked, so we walked along Grove Street through this devastated landscape until we reached what had once been our home.

It was a ruin.

The roof was down. Mud and ash had come through the windows of the lower floor. Everything looked finished.

Then from the back came a shout from Jurgen.

There, emerging from the mud, was Lady, our dog.

Tramp, our other dog, was nearby.

The cat proved more difficult, eventually located among the broken rafters.

Fortunately, beneath all the ash I still had my secret stash of tinned fish. Out came the machete, cans were opened, and our three surviving pets finally got a decent meal.

At this touching moment, Sean did what journalists do.

He shoved a microphone in my face.

“How do you feel?”

I looked at the wreckage of our home.

“We can’t live here.”

Not exactly Shakespeare.

Earlier I had given an emotional account of the evacuation of five random unaccompanied children, including one breastfed baby, and I had already done enough crying for one day.

Now the ABC had its story, but there was another problem.

They had to get the footage back to the airport in time to transmit it.

So the race for Tokua began.

As we approached Pila Pila, I noticed water starting to seep out from a line of banana trees.

I knew what that meant.

“We need high ground. Now.”

I pulled behind a solid brick trade store while the ABC crew looked anxiously at their watches. Every second mattered if they were going to make their aircraft.

About thirty seconds later — only metres from us — the ash dam in the valley broke.

A wall of water, mud and volcanic slurry perhaps six feet high came roaring past.

Nobody suggested getting out to determine whether it was fresh water or salt water.

For once, investigative journalism had its limits.

When the torrent subsided, we were off again.

The journalists were staring at me with a new expression.

Disbelief.

Perhaps even awe.

“How did you know?”

Simple.

“I was here yesterday. Same thing. I knew the signs.”

For approximately thirty seconds I had achieved the status of volcanic expert.

Then Jurgen and I reverted to type.

The journey back to Tokua became an unofficial four-wheel-drive Grand Prix, with two lunatics racing through the aftermath of a volcanic eruption while the ABC crew bounced around worrying about several hundred thousand dollars’ worth of cameras in the back.

We made the charter.

Apparently the story went out the next day and was a cracker.

I wouldn’t know.

We were living in a village by then and couldn’t see the television.

Years later Sean became a good friend in Chelmer, but I still remember that extraordinary first adventure together: the Hercules, the volcano, the buried house, three rescued pets, Ray Martin stuck at a roadblock, a six-foot wall of volcanic slurry, and Sean Dorney waving triumphantly from the back of my ute.

All because, in Rabaul during a volcanic eruption, an ABC journalist couldn’t get through —

but the fuel man could.

Makeshift toilet on a charter flight

Cargo nets, plastic bags and a strict NDA

Makeshift Toilet on a Charter Flight

Kavi’s flight to Kimbe yesterday started like any other. It took off, climbed away from Port Moresby… then quietly turned around.

Never a comforting sight.

The captain announced there was a cooling problem, which in airline language could mean anything from “a warning light flickered” to “we’d rather not discuss it.” They spent the next while circling Port Moresby while every fire engine the airport owned lined the runway looking unusually interested in their arrival. Airlines never tell you much, presumably because ignorance weighs less than panic.

At 2:30 this morning the lights came on again for another attempt. The Colour Run team seems determined to make travel an Olympic event. This time she got away, so fingers crossed.

It reminded me of another aviation adventure during the Rabaul eruption. Volcanic ash and jet engines are an expensive recipe for manufacturing glass where glass definitely shouldn’t be. The little petrol-powered prop planes were a different story—clean the filters, say a prayer, and away they went.

The problem was the charter operators couldn’t sell enough individual tickets, so a group of us pooled our money and chartered the whole aircraft ourselves.

Halfway through the flight a lady became increasingly distressed.

My first thought was, “Oh no… not another mechanical problem.”

No.

It was far more urgent.

She needed a bathroom.

Our aircraft, however, had all the luxury appointments of a flying garden shed.

Being something of the patron saint of lost causes and lame ducks, I volunteered to help. The passengers up front had no idea there was a humanitarian crisis unfolding behind them.

With the engineering skills of a man who’d watched far too much MacGyver, I raided the cargo net, stacked everyone’s bags into a makeshift privacy wall, located a

couple of strategically important plastic bags, and declared the facility officially open for business.

Against all odds, the mission was a complete success.

The temporary amenities were dismantled, the luggage returned before anyone noticed, and the passengers in the front remained blissfully unaware that our aircraft had briefly become the smallest member of the international airport terminal network.

To this day, I remain bound by a strict non-disclosure agreement that existed entirely on a handshake and mutual embarrassment.

Fortunately, the statute of limitations on airborne plumbing appears to have expired.

1994

Pets

Only tramp and his descendants survived

The Pets

When the volcano erupted, we had five children — and five animals.

The animal contingent consisted of two Siamese cats and three dogs.

Taki was a magnificent big male Siamese. Swee Kim was the sweet female Siamese.

Then there was Tramp, our male dog, and Lady, his girlfriend from across the road.

Lady’s owners had moved away and simply left her behind. Initially we chased her away from Tramp’s food bowl, until we realised what had happened.

Tramp had invited her home.

The bloody dog had a heart.

So naturally we adopted her and renamed her Lady — as you do.

Finally there was Sooty, a cocker-spaniel cross and the offspring of our much-loved dog Satchmo. Satchmo had been poisoned with battery acid, apparently because he barked at people passing the house.

That was his job, for God’s sake.

When Rabaul erupted, people had priority. We had no idea where we would end up, and chances were that a logging camp dealing with human refugees would have frowned on us arriving with five children, three dogs, two Siamese cats and assorted luggage.

My emergency animal-management plan was therefore simple:

Put out mountains of food and water and get back as soon as humanly possible.

Three days later I returned to Rabaul with Sean Dorney and the ABC film crew.

Our animals were about to become television stars.

Unfortunately, most of the cast had disappeared.

Only Taki remained in the house, absolutely terrified and hiding amongst the broken rafters. I climbed up to feed him a tin of mackerel in tomato sauce.

Naturally, I spilt it all over myself.

So there I was standing in the ruins of my house, volcano roaring in the background, covered in red tomato sauce and looking as though I had just been seriously wounded.

Then a shout came from the back of the house.

“There’s a lady stuck in the mud!”

Good God.

We rushed around expecting to find some poor woman buried in volcanic ash.

It was Lady.

The dog, not a lady.

She had apparently given up and was lying there, half-covered in ash. We dug her out, but her hips were so painful that she couldn’t bear to be touched. We had to leave her temporarily.

Taki refused to leave the house.

And Sooty took one look at his rescuers and headed for the hills.

I actually cried in exasperation.

So after this magnificent rescue operation involving an ABC film crew, considerable personal risk and a tin of mackerel, our grand total of successfully evacuated animals was:

One.

Tramp.

We put him on Sean Dorney’s lap and headed out of town.

Tramp promptly vomited all over him.

The smell was unbelievable.

After all my earlier complaints to Sean about ABC sub-editors sensationalising the eruption, I considered this a small piece of divine editorial justice.

Sub-editors indeed. Payback had arrived — and it was sitting on Sean’s lap.

We returned later and recovered Lady.

Taki took even longer.

Cats hate leaving home. Volcano or no volcano, Taki apparently regarded evacuation as an unnecessary human overreaction.

When we finally caught him, he fought, scratched and bit with the determination of a tiger.

This time the blood all over me was real.

Sadly, Lady never settled into village life. She wandered into a nearby village and was killed with a bush knife.

Taki eventually went to Lae, where he found himself a girlfriend and presumably decided life after the volcano wasn't too bad after all.

Then, on the very day we were moving to Cairns, Taki disappeared.

Of course he did.

Only Tramp survived the whole saga, and we still have some of his progeny today.

But the funniest part came after the ABC footage went to air.

There we were in the middle of one of the great natural disasters in PNG history: Rabaul devastated, houses collapsing, people evacuated, businesses buried and an entire town wondering what future it had.

And the ABC switchboard apparently started receiving calls:

"WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PETS?"

It amused us enormously.

Forget Paul.

Forget Rabaul.

Forget the volcano.

Did the bloody cat make it?

1994

Volcano is coming

Evacuation to logging camp



Tavurvur

Rabaul — The Night the Mountain Woke Up

18 September 1994

At 3.30 in the morning we were awakened by an earthquake.

I sat bolt upright in bed.

“There’s another one coming.”

Not exactly the sort of bedside prediction your wife wants to hear at 3.30 am.

For the next 27 hours the earthquakes kept coming. We scurried around packing, gathering people and preparing to evacuate Rabaul. Our destination was a friend’s house at Nonga — out of town, out of the caldera and around the next bay.

That seemed considerably more sensible than sitting inside a volcanic caldera waiting to see what happened next.

All night small aircraft were flying overhead. Night flying into Rabaul airport wasn’t normally allowed, so we knew this was serious.

National Disaster in Port Moresby rang me during the night. They needed fuel from us for new Ela Motors vehicles being used to ferry people from Queen's Park, where residents had been told to gather.

While I was in town I looked at my 16,000-litre fuel tanker and thought perhaps leaving sixteen tonnes of fuel sitting in the middle of a volcanic disaster wasn't one of my better business strategies.

So I drove it over Tunnel Hill to somewhere safer.

I put it into first gear for the climb.

And never changed gear.

This was not a night for fuel economy.

I went back to my house to check for looters, turn off the gas and give the pets another feed and water. Then, because priorities are priorities, I sent a computer fax to my boys at boarding school in Canada:

We are evacuating Rabaul. Canberra beat Canterbury.

One should never allow a volcanic emergency to interfere with the rugby league results.

By morning we had about 40 people wanting showers, so my German business partner went back into town to check his house and clean himself up.

He came racing back.

"THE VOLCANO IS ERUPTING!"

We all went outside.

Over the hill a huge plume of ash was climbing into the sky.

There are moments when the brain takes a little while to catch up with what the eyes are seeing.

This was one of them.

We abandoned the sedans and loaded everyone into a truck and two four-wheel drives fitted with radios. There were perhaps 40 or 50 people in our convoy.

My fifth son was only 17 months old and was with my ex-wife in the last vehicle. I sat in the cab of the truck while two of my boys, aged nine and seven, travelled under the canvas in the tray.

Then we joined the exodus.

The North Coast Road was bumper to bumper.

People were walking carrying whatever possessions they could grab. Bags. Clothes. Pots. Saucepans.

When your volcano erupts, apparently the saucepan suddenly becomes a family heirloom.

Empty vehicles were racing back towards Rabaul to collect more people while everyone else was desperately trying to get out.

At one point our convoy stopped briefly.

Unbeknownst to me, two mothers saw the truck loaded with evacuees and made an instant decision. They threw their children onto the back of it.

Nobody stopped them.

The mothers then turned around to collect their belongings.

And we drove off.

With their children.

I knew absolutely nothing about this.

By Kerevat the rain started. It mixed with the volcanic ash and hit the windscreen like continuous bird droppings from some prehistoric bird with a serious digestive problem.

Above us, the ash plume continued climbing.

At Kerevat we turned left, deliberately crossing through the ash deluge, heading towards Put Put via the Warangoi Bridge.

We were running short of diesel, covered in ash and looking increasingly like a convoy of badly made concrete statues.

At the first river we stopped and everyone piled into the water to wash off the ash and mud.

My glasses came off.

Wonderful.

Volcano erupting. Family evacuated. Business somewhere underneath an ash cloud.

And now I was blind.

A kid dived into the river and retrieved them.

Civilisation restored.

Eventually we reached a logging camp and begged for somewhere to stay. They gave us a copra shed — essentially a barn without a door — while the management families got a manager’s house.

It wasn’t the Hilton, but nobody complained about the minibar.

A few days later our maid approached my ex-wife.

“This baby is going to die if it doesn’t get milk.”

“What baby?”

That was when we discovered the full extent of our passenger manifest.

Five children.

The oldest was about 13.

The youngest was a five-month-old breastfed baby.

And there was no mother.

Somewhere during the evacuation, two mothers had thrown their five children onto my truck, turned around to collect their belongings — and watched their children disappear down the North Coast Road with Paul Bluett.

We found a bottle.

We found some Sunshine milk powder.

And suddenly, in addition to evacuating my own family, my staff, friends and assorted refugees while wondering whether my business still existed, I was responsible for five children whose surnames I didn’t even know.

We put a message out over NBC radio.

Eventually word came back:

Take the children to the sports field evacuation camp in Kokopo.

No bloody way.

“Bring the mothers to me.”

The police eventually brought the mothers all the way out to where we were staying.

And we handed their five children back.

I kept no names.

No addresses.

No photographs.

Nothing.

My life had been turned completely upside down.

I lost three houses, three flats and three shops. I nearly went broke.

But that’s another story.

The strange thing is that when I tell stories about the eruption, I can laugh about the tanker crawling over Tunnel Hill in first gear. I can laugh about sending my sons in

Canada the Canberra–Canterbury score while evacuating a volcano. I can laugh about the ash looking like endless bird shit on the windscreen and losing my glasses in the river.

But when I get to those five children, I can’t laugh.

I cry.

Every time.

In the middle of one of the greatest natural disasters in Papua New Guinea’s modern history, two terrified mothers had made a split-second decision.

They saw a truck heading away from an erupting volcano.

They put their children on it.

And trusted complete strangers to keep them alive.

For a few days, somehow, those five children became ours.

More than three decades later, I still don’t know their names.

But I have never forgotten them.

I don’t think I ever will.

And acquiring five children in one hit was surely a living dream — the sort of dream only Joseph could have interpreted. Five children had appeared in my life, and somewhere in the fine print of destiny was the prophecy that another five were still to come. Ten children! Even Joseph might have woken up sweating.

1994

Blacky

But julian was bitten ! I had to put him down

Mad Dogs and Germans

After the 1994 volcanic eruptions, abandoned pets wandered through Rabaul looking for someone to take them in. My German business partner picked up a black dog and, with admirable efficiency, named him Blacky.

Blacky lived at Roushan’s house, at the end of a road where visitors learned to announce themselves from a safe distance. He barked at passers-by. If they kept coming, he bit them. This made him a valued guard dog.

My son Julian was seven and played there often. One day he put his arm around Blacky. Blacky turned and bit him in the face.

The Iowa surgeon at Vunapope did a remarkable job stitching Julian up. I was grateful Julian was in such good hands, but I was sick with worry and furious about what had happened. When I got back to Rabaul, I went to the police station and asked if they could put the dog down.

They were reluctant. They feared the repercussions. They did, however, lend me a shotgun, which seemed an unusual way of staying out of it.

Blacky was locked in the downstairs laundry. I went in with a knot in my stomach and shot him in the head. Then I returned the gun to the police station and went back to work, thinking the worst of the day was over.

My mechanic rang.

“The dog didn’t die.”

So I went back to the police station and borrowed the shotgun again. By then the officers must have wondered whether I intended to take out a membership. I returned to the laundry and shot Blacky behind the ear, from the side.

This time the mechanic had no complaint about the dog surviving.

He complained about the pellets in the meat.

1994-2026

Kim’s passing

Julian’s account

In Sept 1994 when we were forced to leave Rabaul because of the volcanic eruption I was able to continue my schooling at Kimbe International School thanks to the kindness of Kim and Rajah who took me in for a few months, I was only 7 at the time. Uncle Rajah used to take me fishing in his boat and watch cartoons with me of an evening. Aunty Kim made sure I joined in the various activities of the Baha'i community and into the future would always to talk to me about my Baha'i activities whenever I saw her. In 2006 Aunty tutored us in Ruhi Book 5 and it was the first time that book was run in Brisbane.
@Rajah Malaysia 2020 you have been parents to me for which I am deeply grateful. It's a great great sadness to hear this recent news! 😭
Many prayers will be offered on behalf of dearest Aunty Kim and the rest of the family! 🙏

1994

Dads account of julian in kimbe

Based on Julian’s and Jason’s acc



Kim’s funeral notice

Volcano Evacuation

Julian Bluett

When the earthquakes started, I was only seven, but apparently I already possessed wisdom beyond my years.

I calmly informed my older brother Jason, who was nine, that there was nothing to worry about.

He scoffed.

As older brothers do.

Dad was always on the move in those days, and I seemed to go everywhere with him, so when things started getting serious we headed down to the Sepik squatter settlement to collect Vera and all her children.

Vera had been part of our lives for years. One of her boys, Andrew, also had the slightly less admirable habit of breaking into our house while we were away. He apparently resented the amount of time and attention his mother spent looking after the Bluett family.

Family relationships in Rabaul could be complicated.

When I was only three, Vera had taken me to Lae to stay with my grandparents while Mum and Dad took my two older brothers to Canada to investigate a Bahá'í boarding school.

At that age Vera was basically my security blanket.

Unfortunately for her, I took that description rather literally and even tried to follow her into the bathroom.

So when Rabaul began shaking itself apart in 1994, Vera and her children were not strangers. They were family.

We piled everyone into the Mitsubishi Magna.

There seemed to be more children than seatbelts, more pillows than luggage and absolutely no room left for modern occupational health and safety.

Off we went to Nonga.

We stayed with Aunty Helen and Uncle Habib, who worked with Gazelle Agencies. Their place had become temporary accommodation for what felt like half of Rabaul — about forty people sleeping wherever they could find a patch of floor, mattress or space.

The next day we evacuated to Put Put.

That is when one of my clearest memories was formed — being under the canvas during the evacuation with Jason's feet in my face.

Volcanoes are frightening.

Older brothers are worse.

Rabaul was disappearing behind us beneath ash, smoke and enormous clouds rising from the volcanoes. At seven years old you don't really understand the scale of what is happening.

You just know that suddenly you are not going home.

A few days later we travelled to Tokua, where Mobil had chartered an aircraft to evacuate women and children.

Aunty Helen was among us.

I boarded the plane and eventually ended up in Kimbe, where I was handed over to Aunty Kim.

She wasn’t really my aunty.

But from that moment, she might as well have been.

I stayed with her family and attended Kimbe International School until the end of the year.

Uncle Rajah used to take me fishing in his boat and watch cartoons with me of an evening.

For a seven-year-old refugee from a volcanic eruption, life had suddenly become very strange. One week I was under canvas during an evacuation with Jason’s feet in my face. The next I was living with another family hundreds of kilometres away and going to a different school.

But Aunty Kim made it feel safe.

She didn’t just give me somewhere to sleep.

She parented me.

Her children — Sanjeev, Dinesh and Shafirih — accepted this stray little Bluett boy as another brother.

And somehow that relationship never ended.

Life carried everyone off in different directions.

Sanjeev married a Chinese girl.

Dinesh married a Persian.

Shafirih married a Melbourne Greek.

Between them they practically created their own United Nations.

And Aunty Kim continued doing what she had always done.

Checking on me.

Making sure I was all right.

Remaining quietly interested in my life long after the frightened seven-year-old refugee had grown up.

A couple of nights ago, Aunty Kim passed away in Melaka.

Suddenly all those memories came flooding back.

The earthquakes.

The Magna overflowing with children.

The pillows.

Nonga.

The evacuation.

The canvas.

Jason’s feet.

Tokua.

The Mobil charter.

And then Kimbe, where somebody who wasn’t actually my aunty decided that a little boy who had lost his home needed another mother for a while.

Dad is travelling to her funeral today.

I can’t be there because I’m teaching at Kedron.

But I will offer prayers for her soul.

And I will remember that during one of the most frightening moments of my childhood, Aunty Kim opened her home, her family and her heart to me.

More than thirty years later, I understand just how extraordinary that kindness was.

I arrived in Kimbe as a seven-year-old volcanic refugee.

She took me in as a son.

And that is something I will never

forget.

Julian’s full account posted on another WhatsApp group “png friends” has been edited to comply with this groups rules on religious content

1997

Top of the docket

We got back the depot

Ash and Assets - How a Docket Book Bought a Depot – story by Paul Bluett

After the eruption our fuel supplier was magnificent in the early days of the crisis. Containers of food arrived, charter aircraft whisked away women and children to safety, and for a while it felt like we were all starring in one of those disaster movies where humanity pulls together and rises above adversity.

Mind you, the generosity only extended to distributor dependants. Apparently if you weren’t on the approved evacuation list you were expected to stand heroically in the ash cloud and fend for yourself.

Then came the repairs.

At that point our supplier transformed from nimble emergency responder into a giant ocean liner with the turning circle of a small continent. Titanic mode engaged.

“Hit an iceberg? Oh dear. Someone should probably put that in the minutes.”

As our cash reserves began doing their impression of the tide going out, head office rode in to save the day by taking back control of the facility and buying back the stock.

My bacon was saved, but so was my unemployment. We were no longer in charge, which felt a little like being demoted from captain to passenger on our own ship.

Fortunately, the replacement manager sent up from head office found life in post-eruption Rabaul challenging. Bills weren’t getting paid, accommodation providers were becoming increasingly enthusiastic in their reminders, and patience was becoming an endangered species.

Then came the fateful moment.

A genuine “bank error in your favour, collect $200” moment.

While waiting for his company to pay his accommodation bill, our man borrowed one of our docket books from the drawer and thoughtfully wrote himself an order on our company stationery to cover the costs.

Convenient.

Creative.

Possibly not covered in the management training manual.

The little administrative innovation eventually surfaced.

We responded with our finest acting performances.

Shock.

Horror.

Disbelief.

One expatriate asked me solemnly, “Will you be pressing charges?”

“Absolutely,” I replied with all the seriousness I could muster while trying not to grin.

Remarkably, the wheels turned very quickly after that.

The depot was handed back to us.

Not long afterwards they sold it to us entirely.

So in the end, what years of negotiations, meetings and strategy couldn’t achieve was accomplished by one borrowed docket book and a temporary accommodation problem.

History is full of great turning points.

Ours just happened to come on our own letterhead.

1998 circa

Our tug boat in Brisbane

A Tugboat, a Sacked Captain and Dreamworld

Cape Raoul

My middle son—or third son, depending on how you count these things—Jason was probably the most handsome and charming of the five. The others may lodge objections in the comments.

He was sick at boarding school, Nudgee to be precise, and I happened to be in Brisbane for work, so I took him to a specialist.

Unfortunately, “in Brisbane for work” meant that my body was in the doctor’s surgery while my brain remained aboard a tugboat.

The phone kept ringing. The doctor politely hinted that I should put it away and concentrate on my sick child. He was so subtle, and I was so stressed, that I initially mistook his irritation for a medical symptom.

The cause of all this stress was the Cape Raoul.

Somehow, and without any obvious qualifications, I had been put in charge of our tugboat: an old salty white captain, a PNG crew and me—the only man aboard whose main nautical experience was signing cheques.

The first disagreement was over morale.

I wanted to take the PNG crew to Dreamworld and show them a good time. The captain didn’t approve.

That should have warned him. Never stand between a Papua New Guinean crew and Dreamworld—especially when I controlled the payroll.

Then I began to suspect the captain had alerted the Australian marine authorities to some new regulations with which the tug did not comply. The equipment wasn’t required in PNG, but it was required in Australia, and suddenly there was a real danger that the boat would be detained.

So I sacked the captain.

It was a bold and decisive move, slightly weakened by one small detail: we now had a tugboat in Australia and nobody qualified to take it back to PNG.

At the time we had bought a workers’ cottage in Moorooka. Two sons were at boarding school and two were at university. The older boys did a wonderful job looking after the younger ones during their weekends out from boarding—another example of children compensating for their father’s business decisions.

I heard that a Brisbane radio station was offering free advertisements to businesses creating employment. We certainly had a vacancy, so I advertised for a tugboat captain.

One applicant rang while I was in the shower.

I was so desperate not to miss a possible captain that I stepped out dripping wet and answered the phone. For reasons known only to seafarers, I told him I had just stepped out of the shower to take his call.

He later said that was when he decided I was honest.

Apparently, dishonest shipowners put on trousers before answering the telephone.

I handed him my card. He looked at it, looked at me, and said, “Paul fucking Bluett.” It was slightly daunting, but somehow reassuring. On the old sea-dog scale, I took it as acceptance—and apparently I had passed the interview, even if I thought I was interviewing him.

He turned out to be a terrific bloke, so I employed him. I also kept my promise and took the PNG crew to Dreamworld. The former captain may have understood maritime law, but I understood industrial relations.

My business partner—the real boss—was understandably nervous about my management style. It appeared to involve sacking captains, conducting interviews naked and taking deckhands on roller-coasters.

Nevertheless, we got the job done.

To meet the regulations, we installed a system that would flood the engine room with carbon dioxide in the event of a fire. We avoided having the tug detained, somehow found the money, and eventually got the Cape Raoul back to PNG.

At our peak, we owned five tugs and five dumb barges.

The barges were officially called “dumb” because they had no engines. I sometimes wondered whether the term also applied to the owners.

As soon as I could, I got out of shipping. My former partner moved into helicopters, while I concentrated on selling fuel and contributing more efficiently to global warming.

We went our separate ways—he went up in the world, and I remained firmly attached to the ground.

But Jason recovered, the crew got to Dreamworld, the tug escaped Australia, and nobody set fire to the engine room.

By my standards, it was a completely successful business trip.

1998

Hotel bill

Press charges

After the eruption our fuel supplier was magnificent in the early days of the crisis. Containers of food arrived, charter aircraft whisked away women and children to safety, and for a while it felt like we were all starring in one of those disaster movies where humanity pulls together and rises above adversity.

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2000

My day as a flight hostie

She was having twins on the plane

THE FLIGHT FROM HELL (OR HEAVEN, DEPENDING ON YOUR POINT OF VIEW)

I boarded the Air Niugini flight from Port Moresby to Rabaul and found myself a seat in the back left corner, directly opposite the toilet. The flight was reasonably full. It was a perfectly ordinary start to a perfectly ordinary day.

What could possibly go wrong?

Shortly after take-off, a lady collapsed onto the floor beside me. I assumed she was airsick. Then I noticed all three hosties sprinting up and down the aisle like the aircraft was on fire.

This was clearly not ordinary sickness.

The lady let out a groan.

Eventually even I worked out she was having a baby.

The hostesses immediately evacuated the entire row opposite me and moved the passengers forward. A few minutes later they decided I had to go too. The trouble was there were no spare seats left, so I was promoted to the galley jump seat, facing the passengers and, more importantly, facing a tray full of orange juice.

The captain came on the intercom.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will be returning to Port Moresby.”

No explanation.

Just the traditional pilot style of communication — tell the passengers as little as possible and let their imaginations do the rest.

Meanwhile I was becoming desperately thirsty. The orange juice was only a metre away, but I didn’t want to appear selfish by helping myself.

Then inspiration struck.

I announced that I would personally deliver drinks to the passengers and, as payment for my services, I would keep one for myself.

That broke the ice.

Passengers were laughing, patting me on the back and encouraging me in my new career as an airborne beverage attendant. They got their drinks. I got mine.

Everyone was happy.

Then turbulence arrived.

The lightweight cups took off in every direction. Orange juice was flying through the cabin like a tropical weather system. I spent the next few minutes collecting empties and chasing runaway cups.

Back in Port Moresby we sat under a covered walkway in the blazing sun for what felt like several weeks. The mother and baby was taken away. The aircraft was cleaned. The floor was disinfected.

I got talking to a St John Ambulance-trained nurse / hostie

“This will be a nil-service flight,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I haven’t been disinfected.”

“I’ll do it.”

And apparently that was good enough.

So there I was, confined to the galley, serving drinks to passengers and helping restore order to the aviation industry.

Everyone got a drink.

Everyone was happy.

Meanwhile the second baby was born in the ambulance on the way to hospital.

The next week a newspaper columnist posed the important question:

“If the pilot became sick, what would the fuel company representative do?”

A competition was held to name the twins.

I submitted my suggestion:

Papua and New Guinea.

After all, one was born in the aircraft and the other in the ambulance.

It seemed only fair that between them they covered both territories.

2000s

Maritime influx at Kokopo

Seventy Canadian sailors turn up for dinner

Maritime Influx at Kokopo

The tall ship Pacific Grace out of Victoria, Canada called into our Mobil wharf in Rabaul for diesel. Christian youth training ship, a few “wayward youths”, and nine crew.

I had a Channel 16 marine radio in the car. “Come for dinner,” I said. The captain replied cautiously:

“You mean the nine crew?”

“No, the ship.”

Silence.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Now this was one of those moments where my wife was mysteriously absent, which suited me perfectly, because if I had announced “I’m inviting 70 backpacking sailors for dinner,” the answer may have involved words like “Absolutely not” and possibly a saucepan. So, freedom reigned.

I mobilised the operation. Four maids, one chef, 60 litres of ice cream, mountains of Rabaul and Kokopo fruit being chopped at military speed. Fried rice going in every wok in East New Britain. Mixed grill ordered from Anderson’s butcher. Backup food requisitioned from three hotels in case Canada had brought Viking appetites.

The ship only had a cold-water hose shower on deck, so I offered proper hot showers. I sent buses to collect them, but the young sailors appeared independently from every direction like cheerful pirates.

That night our place filled with sunburnt Canadians, wandering youth, missionaries, sailors, my boys, half of Kokopo and probably a few people who just smelled barbecue smoke and wandered in.

We had a slideshow of their travels across the Pacific. Everybody sang Kumbaya with alarming sincerity. The captain had about six kids who were “yacht schooled”, which I discovered is apparently a real thing.

By complete coincidence my two boys, boarding at the Bahá’í school in Victoria, Canada, knew some of them. Small world. Or possibly very determined Canadians.

At one point I caught one of the “wayward youths” quietly going through my office drawers.

Oddly enough, I didn’t care.

My heart was full, the freezers were empty, the ice cream was disappearing at industrial speed, and for one night a random collection of sailors, PNG locals, Australians and wandering kids from Canada sat together in Kokopo like we’d all known each other forever.

When they left, they presented me with a beautiful, engraved glass marked PACIFIC GRACE. One of my favourite possessions. Sadly, like several assets of that era, it disappeared in the divorce settlement. Probably listed under “maritime losses.”

2005

Good guys with machetes

Carrying a machete to advantage

Good Guys With Machetes

My manager and I lived at Nonga and travelled into Rabaul each day for work. It was a pleasant arrangement. He was a gentle soul and his wife, half Thai and half Iranian, was even gentler—she had inherited the Thai disposition rather than the Persian warrior genes.

Unfortunately, on her drive into town, a few local idiots had taken to greeting her with offensive hand gestures. Not exactly the tourism campaign Rabaul was aiming for.

Now, I should confess that I carried a bush knife under the driver's seat of my car. This was PNG. Plenty of people did. The important point is that I had never actually used it, unless you count opening cartons and intimidating stubborn coconuts.

One lunchtime, driving home, someone decided to extend the same offensive courtesy to me.

Big mistake.

I slammed on the brakes.

The tyres squealed.

I selected reverse.

The engine roared.

The car shot backwards with all the subtlety of a wounded buffalo.

I leapt out, grabbed the machete and charged.

By this stage, the original offender had achieved Olympic qualifying speed and disappeared entirely. The only person left was his unfortunate friend.

"What is the name of the man who made that gesture?" I demanded.

The Mafia code of silence immediately descended upon the village.

Nobody knew anything.

Nobody had seen anything.

Apparently I had imagined the entire incident.

I raised both my voice and the machete.

The crowd grew.

Children appeared from nowhere.

Dogs joined the meeting.

Finally, one brave soul cracked.

“Chris!”

Success.

The witness protection program was clearly underfunded.

Satisfied, I returned to my vehicle and drove home.

The next day, exercising what little wisdom I possessed, I sought out the village councillor. He was a man whose name was Volavola and whose temperament was, appropriately, volatile.

I explained the situation.

He listened patiently and then said,

“Those boys use drugs. They can hurt people. Don’t go there. Leave it with us.”

A remarkably sensible suggestion.

The offensive gestures stopped immediately.

My reputation, however, grew considerably.

According to local legend, I had reversed a speeding vehicle, leapt out with a machete, interrogated an entire village and extracted a confession in under three minutes.

No one was hurt.

No machetes were swung.

And poor Chris probably spent several weeks wondering which of his friends had sold him out.

I’m back in png for two months

Catch mulai

2005-2026

Aminio Bale

Our tenth kid

Aminio Bale — The Sequel

My story about Geoff Heard reminded me that there was another chapter — and somehow, as usual, our families managed to become hopelessly intertwined.

Aminio Bale was a young Tolai boy from Rabaul who was adopted by an Australian Bahá'í family, Geoff and Leila Heard.

As a young man he was sent off to Australia to attend a Bahá'í summer school, meet other Bahá'ís and get a taste of Western culture.

And, as chance would have it, he ran into Ione when she was a teenager.

Ione thought Aminio was enormously entertaining, particularly his pronunciation of fish and chips.

It came out something like "fis and sips."

She loved it.

Years later I would marry Ione, so perhaps Aminio had already infiltrated my family before I even knew what was going on.

Aminio eventually married Roslyn and they proceeded to have a bunch of children.

He and I later served together on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Papua New Guinea, and in 1983 we even travelled together to Israel.

One of Aminio and Roslyn's daughters was named Leila, after Aminio's Australian mother, Leila Heard.

Now this is where the family tree stops looking like a tree and starts looking more like a plate of spaghetti.

Leila grew up and married Thiagan.

Thiagan is now my brother-in-law — although he wasn't then.

Leila and Thiagan had five boys.

Five boys.

Sound familiar?

Their youngest was Shahab — half Tolai, half Indian Malaysian, and eventually 100% part of our mob.

From 2015 to 2019, Shahab and Rhohan lived together in Melaka. Rhohan learned much of his Tok Pisin from Shahab and his four brothers.

So there we had a boy from my family living in Malaysia learning Tok Pisin from five boys whose grandfather was a Tolai from Rabaul who had been adopted by an Australian Bahá'í family.

Perfectly normal family arrangement.

Then it came time for Rhohan to leave Malaysia and join us in Australia.

Shahab was distraught.

So we said, basically:

Come with us.

Cousin? Foster son? Adopted son? Nephew?

Who cared.

Just come.

And he did.

We adopted Shahab and he became, in every way that mattered to us, my tenth kid.

Unfortunately, Australian immigration had a slightly less flexible interpretation of our family tree.

The adoption wasn't recognised in the way we had hoped, and a few days ago his Australian visa finally expired.

And just like that, he was gone.

I didn't even get to say goodbye.

My tenth kid had flown the coop.

Now he's 20 years old, back in Malaysia, and doesn't yet have his PNG visa.

And when I think about it, the whole thing started generations earlier with a young Tolai boy from Rabaul going off to Australia, meeting a teenage Ione and making her laugh by ordering "fis and sips."

Families are funny things.

Sometimes they're created by birth.

Sometimes by marriage.

Sometimes by adoption.

And sometimes you just look around one day and discover you've collected another kid.

Ten so far.

Tomorrow the prequel

2006

Camelot

No gold taps after all

One of the questions that used to drive me crazy after the 1994 eruption was:

“When are they going to rebuild Rabaul?”

“They?” I’d reply. “Who exactly are they?”

It was as if there was some mysterious committee sitting in Port Moresby with a giant Lego set labelled Rabaul, just waiting for the signal.

Confession time. I was a Rabaul diehard. Or at least I thought I was.

My ex-wife dug her heels in at Nonga. She had absolutely no intention of embracing Kokopo. Several times a week I found myself playing chauffeur—shopping, coffee with friends, the social circuit. Eventually even I had to admit the writing was on the wall.

Then along came Joe Tse to the rescue. Joe was a cigar-smoking bookie with a famous brother and a “nurse” for a partner—. Joe knew everyone and everything, and before long he’d found us a house perched up Kenabot Hill.

For a while I was still driving young Eliot into Sacred Heart in Rabaul each morning. Sometimes I’d collect a carload of kids in school uniforms. Old habits die hard. But eventually the office moved to Kokopo, and then the last of our children headed off to boarding school. That chapter quietly closed.

Then we heard whispers about the house.

The Provincial Administrator’s mansion.

Built with no expense spared by Rudy, the hairy-chested Italian whose shirt buttons always seemed to be losing a battle with gravity. Rumour had it the place even had gold taps. Whether they were solid gold or just very enthusiastic brass hardly mattered—the legend had already taken on a life of its own.

The new Administrator wanted absolutely nothing to do with the place. A volunteer friend held the lease and was desperate to escape it.

So, with just enough guile to stay respectable, we quietly took over the lease, moved in first, and asked for forgiveness later. Nobody really wanted to rent such a palace to a white businessman outside the government system anyway.

Inside were magnificent carved Sepik poles soaring from the ground floor to the second floor ceiling. Outside were panoramic views across Blanche Bay that money simply couldn’t buy.

Everything about the house was oversized.

The rooms.

The verandas.

The ceilings.

The maintenance bills.

Everything except the rent.

We christened it Camelot.

Over the years we spent a small fortune restoring and improving it. Eventually the Provincial Government found the courage to announce a rent increase.

“No problem,” I said cheerfully. “We’ll simply deduct all the improvements we’ve paid for.”

That conversation seemed to drain the enthusiasm from the room. Somehow it all became too difficult, and they quietly left us alone.

Negotiating with the Masta Bilong Cross wasn’t always straightforward.

To top it all off, we lived only a few doors from a former Prime Minister.

Looking back, fortune smiled on us more than once. We lost Rabaul, but somehow we found Camelot.

Not a bad trade in the end

2006

Another Fred story

I was there when he found his plane

A Bit Of History.

Whenever a young American pilot had to run across the sand to hide in the jungle, a group of local children ran closely behind him carrying tiny palm-frond brooms.

Their job was simple and terrifying: erase every single one of his boot prints before the armed patrols arrived.

In the summer of 1943, twenty-seven-year-old Fred Hargesheimer was shot down over the island of New Britain in the South Pacific. After his reconnaissance plane burst into flames, he parachuted into one of the most unforgiving rainforests in the world.

For thirty-one days, he wandered alone. He was starving, delirious, and suffering from malaria, surviving on raw roots and muddy stream water while enemy troops searched the island.

On the thirty-second day, rustling coming from the thick jungle canopy made Fred assume his time was up.

Instead of soldiers, he stepped into a clearing and found a group of Nakanai villagers.

In occupied territory, helping an Allied pilot carried an automatic death sentence. Occupational forces offered rewards for captured airmen and routinely executed entire villages suspected of harboring them. The Nakanai people knew the risks, but they carried the bedridden pilot back to their coastal village anyway.

Fred was so sick that his throat had constricted, making it impossible for him to swallow solid food.

Seeing him waste away, a young mother named Ida stepped into the thatched hut. For ten days, she expressed her own breast milk into a cup, feeding the dying pilot alongside her own newborn baby until he regained enough strength to eat.

Whenever patrols approached the coast, a villager would blow quietly into a hidden conch shell. That low, hollow sound gave Fred seconds to vanish into the dense foliage, while the children swept away his footprints in the sand.

For seven months, the village sheltered the man they affectionately called "Mastah Preddi."

In February 1944, Australian commandos established contact with the village and arranged a midnight rescue by an American submarine. As Fred paddled a canoe out

into the dark water, the villagers stood on the beach watching him disappear into the night.

Fred returned home to Minnesota, got married, raised a family, and built a quiet life as a tractor salesman.

On paper, his war was over. But in his mind, the debt remained wide open.

He kept remembering Ida, the sound of the conch shell, and the children with their tiny brooms. He kept asking himself a simple question: How do you repay people who risked their children's lives to save yours?

In 1960, sixteen years after his rescue, Fred boarded a ship and returned to New Britain alone.

As his boat pulled up to the shore in the moonlight, hundreds of villagers were waiting on the sand. As he stepped onto the beach, they began singing the only English song they knew: God Save the Queen.

Fred broke down and wept. He found Ida, meeting the healthy young man she had nursed alongside him during the war.

When he returned to Minnesota, he realized a simple visit was not enough. Learning that the region lacked basic educational facilities, the middle-aged salesman began going door-to-door in his hometown, raising small donations from local church groups and neighbors.

By 1963, Fred had raised enough money to travel back to the island and build the village’s first permanent primary school.

A few years later, Fred and his wife Dorothy took an even bigger step. They sold their possessions in Minnesota, moved to New Britain, and spent four years living at the base of a volcano, teaching the local children themselves.

Over the next four decades, Fred traveled back and forth between America and Papua New Guinea. He helped build additional schools, libraries, and a medical clinic.

In 2000, the Nakanai people formally honored him in a traditional ceremony, naming him "Suara Auru", their Chief Warrior.

In 2006, at ninety years old, Fred made his final trip into the jungle.

Locals had finally located the overgrown wreckage of his crashed P-38 aircraft deep in the bush. Unable to walk the rough trail, the elderly pilot was carried through the dense rainforest on a wooden stretcher borne on the shoulders of the villagers.

Seventy years after dropping out of the sky as a starving soldier, Fred sat beside the moss-covered wing of the plane that had started it all.

He passed away in 2010 at the age of ninety-four. The schools and clinics he built still serve the children of the island today.

Most people spend their lives trying to settle debts measured in dollars and cents.

2007-2026

My 6th Son

Rhohan: From Reptiles to Cryptocurrency

MY SIXTH SON

Rhohan came to PNG when he was two—but by then he had already established his approach to life: see danger, climb fence, investigate personally.

At the Melaka Zoo, he spotted a giant monitor lizard and climbed into its enclosure to tackle it. Fortunately, his mother—now my wife—tackled Rhohan first. No fear whatsoever. He has always loved reptiles; the bigger and more capable of swallowing him, the better. Today, the carpet pythons around our Brisbane home are less household pests and more old friends dropping in.

After Kavi and I married in Cairns, we would take him bushwalking with a machete. He swam in creeks, explored everything and treated parental warnings as useful information requiring independent verification.

When we moved to Kokopo, Rhohan was eight and attended Rabaul International School at Takubar. During our first week, we stayed at Kokopo Beach Bungalows while Kavi took my first daughter, Elly, to Cairns to begin boarding school with my sister Sharon.

That left me in charge of Rhohan.

My responsibilities were simple: keep him alive, keep him in uniform and feed him. The last part was easy because he would eat only bacon. As a temporary single parent, I discovered that bacon is not merely a breakfast food—it is an entire child-management system.

He made friends immediately, usually with boys who shared his mischievous spirit and questionable respect for boundaries.

Eleven years ago today, when he was nine, we sent him to Melaka to live with his natural father, five PNG male cousins and attend Melaka International School. Five cousins seemed sufficient supervision, although in hindsight it may simply have created a larger operational unit.

The only one of my children to learn Tok Pisin in Malaysia because his 5 cousins spoke to each other like a code so others were kept out.

Kavi and I moved to Chelmer in Brisbane in 2018. We chose a house beside the river, complete with pythons and possums, so Rhohan felt right at home. We put him into boarding at Marist College Ashgrove.

He was good at rugby.

He hated boarding.

Both statements remain equally true.

Meanwhile, we were trying to work fly-in, fly-out in PNG while raising baby Mona. We went through three nannies—from PNG, the Philippines and Sri Lanka—plus the occasional Pommie or other backpacking au pair brave enough to apply.

Then COVID arrived, and I found myself staring down the barrel of retirement. Rhohan became a day student, while son number seven arrived from Malaysia and joined him at boarding school.

One thing led to another, and both boys eventually moved to Indooroopilly State High School. Cycling there was faster than driving across the river, so they remained until graduation—possibly the first major family decision based entirely on Brisbane traffic.

Rhohan began playing rugby for a nearby club linked to the University of Queensland. Once we discovered he had ADHD and got the right support, his grades improved dramatically. He gained entry to a Commerce degree at QUT and is now in his second year studying marketing and accounting.

He originally wanted to study zoology, which seemed logical for someone who had been trying to wrestle wildlife since the age of two. I talked him out of it. Apparently accounting is safer, although I am beginning to reconsider that judgment.

His rugby season ended abruptly last weekend with an injury. Today he is on crutches and facing 12 weeks of rehabilitation. Knowing Rhohan, the greatest medical challenge will not be healing the injury—it will be convincing him that “rest” is an actual activity.

At 20, he has a steady girlfriend, has made money trading cryptocurrency and has even created his own meme coin.

A meme coin.

I am a chartered accountant and spent a lifetime building a real company that sells actual fuel from actual tanks. My sixth son apparently creates imaginary money on the internet—and may yet prove that he is the financial genius in the family.

From tackling giant monitor lizards to tackling rugby players and now tackling global finance, Rhohan has never lacked courage.

Judgment occasionally, perhaps.

Photo 2015, leaving png for Melaka on this day, the roof of a car is the safest place for him, out of trouble !

2007-2026

Taekwondo

A hard headed woman

TAEKWONDO

I was looking for a hard-headed woman—but perhaps not one quite this hard.

Kavitha was the fourth child, always feisty and a slip of a thing, but appearances were deceptive. She became a champion taekwondo fighter, first for her state and then at Malaysian level. I have been careful during disagreements ever since.

Her family story is complicated, as they say nowadays. Her grandfather was taken away by the Japanese during the war and never returned. When her grandmother remarried, Kavi's father helped raise his younger siblings. The family were strong Bahá'ís, and her father became a respected community leader.

Kavi grew up collecting languages. Tamil was her mother tongue, Hokkien came from the kampong children, Malay from school and English from university. She attended a Christian convent high school—just to ensure all religious bases were covered.

She rode a motorcycle to university in Penang and studied town planning. A tiny taekwondo champion roaring around Penang on a motorbike—what could possibly go wrong?

She first married a Chindian—Chinese-Indian—and moved to Laos as a Bahá'í pioneer and volunteer. They ran a small school in the provinces, and she quickly learnt Lao, a close cousin of Thai.

When her first child was due, they crossed into Thailand for the birth. Their daughter—who would eventually become my first daughter—then encountered paperwork problems. The practical solution was to smuggle the baby back into Laos and complete the paperwork later.

Nothing builds confidence in government administration quite like beginning life as an illegal immigrant.

A son followed, although by then Malaysia seemed a considerably easier place in which to produce children.

Life in remote Laos became isolating and soul-destroying, so the family returned to Malaysia. Her brother then recruited them to work for our company in Papua New Guinea.

What a can-do woman she proved to be. She worked in Rabaul, Kavieng and Alotau before returning to Malaysia as the marriage ran into difficulties. In time, she gained full custody of the children.

Then one thing led to another—as one thing has a habit of doing—and we married in Cairns in 2013.

It was the best wedding I have ever attended, although perhaps I am biased.

I had already bought a house in Kokopo in anticipation, and we moved into it in March 2014. Kavi began as my PA before moving into marketing. I thought I had employed my wife, but it soon became clear that she was managing me.

In 2015, after several unsuccessful IVF attempts, we decided to adopt. We first took in a pregnant mother and paid all her expenses, only for her to decide that she wanted to keep her baby. It was disappointing for us, but probably the right ending for mother and child.

Then, in 2016, we found our girl—my second daughter—with very mixed parentage. In PNG, that can mean almost anything, sometimes all at once.

Despite speaking Tamil, Hokkien, Malay, English and Lao—and understanding quite a bit of Thai—Kavi still struggles with Tok Pisin. She can understand it but cannot bring herself to speak it. To her, Tok Pisin is apparently English that has suffered a workplace accident.

Then, in 2017, we started the Colour Run, and our charity work truly began.

But that is the subject of my next story.

Photo

Hoskins airport this morning, brother Thiagan, the birthday boy

We got bumped yesterday, no surprises there, the surprise is we managed to fly at all !

2007

Beyond the manual

Cyclone Guba, and an earthen wharf built by hand

Beyond the Manual

In 2007, Cyclone Guba struck the Popondetta area with devastating force. The Category 3 cyclone claimed around 175 lives and washed away much of the region’s infrastructure. Bridges disappeared overnight, including the vital Girua and Kumusi crossings.

The fuel wharf Oro was about 50 kilometres from town, with Girua Airport roughly halfway along the road. Under normal circumstances we had contingency plans. Lengths of pipe were stored at strategic points so fuel could be pumped across flooded rivers, suspended by a crane, with trucks waiting on either side. It was all neatly laid out in the operating manual. But no manual had prepared us for this.

There were simply too many rivers gone. The road to the wharf had been cut in multiple places. We had fuel, but we couldn’t get it to where it was needed. To make matters worse, our largest customer was on the far side of the Kumusi River, a river already famous for its role in the Kokoda campaign. In flood, the Kumusi is terrifying. Boulders the size of cars come thundering downstream at remarkable speed.

Then someone remembered the coastal road to Goma — another place with its own wartime history.

The townspeople rallied together and built a makeshift earthen wharf at Goma. It was an extraordinary community effort. The next problem was finding fuel quickly enough to keep the province running.

Luck arrived in the form of a Filipino Chinese trader Ringo whose barge happened to be passing by carrying 400,000 litres of fuel. We bought the lot.

Every spare truck we could find was pressed into service. Drivers worked around the clock, hauling fuel from the temporary landing point back to Popondetta. Against all odds, the lights stayed on.

It was the second time in only two years that we had come perilously close to running out of fuel completely. Yet once again, a combination of local ingenuity, community spirit and a little bit of luck carried us through. When the bridges were gone and the roads had vanished, the people of Oro Province simply found another way.

2009

Antoinette

Betha too

Where’s Town?

“Where’s town?”

In East New Britain, that depended entirely on who you asked.

If you lived in Rabaul, town was Kokopo. If you lived in Kokopo, town was Rabaul. It was a harmless local expression, but it always amused me how everyone thought the other place was the centre of the universe.

Then I left Camelot.

Ione found an apartment in Port Moresby, and I followed. Looking back, it marked the beginning of one of the darkest periods of my life.

Our new head office was little more than a home office before working from home became fashionable. The Port Moresby branch was finding its feet, while the world itself seemed to be losing its balance. The Global Financial Crisis was unfolding, banks were collapsing, fortunes evaporating, and confidence disappearing overnight.

I tried to make sense of it all the only way I knew how.

The Post-Courier invited me to write a series of articles explaining the crisis in plain English. Eight articles later, I had managed to describe collateralised debt, failing banks and frozen credit markets in terms ordinary middle-class Papua New Guineans could understand.

Ironically, I could explain what was happening to the world’s economy, but I couldn’t explain what was happening to my own life.

Some chapters are better left unwritten.

We lived first in an apartment overlooking Fairfax Harbour, then in a house gazing out across the sea. The views were magnificent.

I, however, was completely at sea.

My greatest source of comfort was my mate Bruce Mallar, now sadly gone. Bruce had a gift that few men possess. Women were simply drawn to him. He could walk into a room full of strangers and leave with everyone’s friendship. His humour and companionship helped keep me afloat during a year when the current seemed determined to pull me under.

As my marriage slowly unravelled, my ex began spending longer and longer periods in Australia. Eventually came the first separation.

I moved out.

Port Moresby, though, has a way of drawing people together. Invitations to cocktail parties and business functions became more frequent, and I found myself in unfamiliar social circles.

Two remarkable women quietly took me under their wing.

Antoinette, my insurance broker, seemed to know everyone in business. Betha, daughter of the Prime Minister, knew everyone in politics. Between them they could walk into any room in Papua New Guinea and greet half the guests by name.

They would accompany me to functions, introduce me around, and ensure I never stood awkwardly in the corner holding a warm glass and wondering who to speak to next.

I’m sure it confused plenty of onlookers.

There was never anything romantic about these friendships—only kindness, loyalty and generosity when I needed them most. We remain friends to this day, and I remain grateful for their quiet support during a period when life seemed determined to rewrite my script.

Sometimes the greatest kindness isn’t rescuing someone.

It’s simply refusing to let them face the storm alone.

2012

Greg

Another story

Greg was a Papua New Guinean at heart—just happened to come in a slightly unexpected wrapping. Blonde hair, big grin, and a spirit that seemed permanently switched to “adventure mode.”
He lived life at full throttle—preferably on two wheels, occasionally in a clown costume, and always just one step ahead of common sense. If there was a hill, he’d jump it. If there was an engine, he’d push it. And if there was absolutely no reason to do something… well, that probably made it even more appealing.
Trying to keep track of Greg was like trying to supervise a fireworks display in a windstorm—impressive, unpredictable, and best enjoyed from a safe distance. As his brother keeping an eye on him was a full-time job that no one had successfully completed!
Greg had a special relationship with the police over the years… not so much “law enforcement” as “friendly pursuit partners.” Whether flying past the Lae showgrounds in a stunt or testing the limits of what a motorbike could do (and what the police could tolerate), he always managed to stay one throttle twist ahead—most of the time!
When he moved into television, the camera finally found something lively enough to keep up with him. Give Greg a camera anywhere in PNG and suddenly the whole village became part of the story—and usually part of the fun. He had a gift for turning everyday moments into something memorable, often with a cheeky grin behind the lens.
His creative energy was unstoppable. If there was a shoot happening, Greg wasn’t just filming it—he was probably hanging off something, improvising something, or convincing everyone that whatever crazy idea he had would definitely work (and somehow… it usually did).
And through all of this—through the noise, the laughter, the speed, and the stories—Greg was simply a bloke who loved people, loved life, and made sure everyone around him had a better story to tell because he was in it.

A tribute to my brother greg who’s passing 12th June in 2012

2013-2026

I used to live in png

My third tour of duty in png with a new wife

I used to live in PNG.

That’s not really true.

I’ve maintained a home in PNG for 61 years — which probably qualifies me as either loyal or slightly institutionalised.

My third return to PNG came with a brand new family package attached.

I actually left PNG to get divorced and remarry because Australian law and institutions function a little more predictably. PNG, on the other hand, is like living in a fishbowl balanced on a PMV roof — once life gets messy, everybody knows before you do.

One of life’s little ironies was that I ended up marrying an Indian lady and couldn’t have been happier about it. Our monsoon wedding was the most culturally diverse event my favourite aunty had ever attended. We had Papua New Guineans, Malaysians, Aussies, Japanese, Persians, Filipinos, Chinese, Indians and an Aboriginal family from Cairns all under one soggy roof trying to work out whose relatives were dancing and whose relatives were arguing.

Then we had another reception in Malaysia for the extended connections. By this stage even the seating plan looked like the United Nations had sponsored a curry night.

My wife Kavitha speaks Tamil, Malay, some Hokkien, Lao, understands Thai, picked up Tok Pisin, and has the softest heart of anyone I’ve ever met. She can calm babies, negotiate with market vendors in three languages, and somehow make every stray child and dog feel adopted within ten minutes.

So naturally I bought another house in Kokopo to replace the ones the volcano had kindly destroyed over the years — three times. Apparently I collect volcanic real estate the way other people collect stamps.

Her two children were “Chindian” — mostly Indian, with a Peranakan Chinese grandmother — which meant our family photos already looked like Air Niugini safety cards before we even started expanding.

We wanted to turn Kokopo into a proper home.

Unfortunately Kavitha was clucky.

By then I already had seven children.

At some point I stopped introducing them individually and started referring to them by shift roster.

People would ask how many kids I had and I’d pause to do a head count like a small village councillor after a cyclone.

The upside was we never needed to hire entertainment.

The downside was we probably qualified for our own rugby league side and reserve bench.

2013-2026

Joanne

Our third daughter

From 1985 I started flying into Buka selling fuel. Sometimes the old flight would stop at Nissan Island, which in those days felt like the end of the earth and one stop beyond Qantas baggage policy.

About then a local bloke from Nissan called Paul met a girl from nearby Pinipel Island. He was from the Big Pigeon clan, she was from the Small Pigeon clan, which apparently meant marriage was approved by both culture and ornithology.

Their daughter Sandy went off to high school on Nissan, then later to Rabaul looking for work, where she met a Sepik bloke named Frank. Frank achieved pregnancy at Olympic speed and then vanished with such efficiency he could have been recruited by intelligence agencies.

Sandy moved into Takubar settlement and found work with an Indian lady and her white husband — the “big boss” of the fuel company. They had recently adopted a little girl named Mona and needed a nanny/maid/general miracle worker.

Joan — which Frank had somehow pronounced “Joanne” — was three years old. Babysitters were scarce, so the kind Indian lady said, “Bring her too.” Which in PNG is how half the population gets adopted accidentally.

Before long Joanne was absorbed into our family like instant noodles into boiling water. She and Mona became sisters by mutual decision and administrative confusion. They went everywhere together — pools, restaurants, school events — and we paid for international school for both of them.

At some point we asked ourselves:
“Should we adopt her too?”

Complication:
Her mother was living with us.

That created paperwork so confusing even government departments started asking us questions.

Then COVID hit and everything became long-distance bureaucracy. Our good lawyer disappeared, welfare became harder than getting fuel drums into the Highlands in wet season, and the Australian student visa process turned into an Olympic endurance event.

Eventually, after enough forms to deforest a small province, Joanne finally arrived in Australia. Mona had to change schools to St Aidan’s Anglican Girls’ School, which actually turned out better than the state school anyway.

Meanwhile back in Buka, Frank was finally spotted at the market. One of the aunties recognised him and allegedly gave chase with a knife. Which, honestly, was probably the most accurate child support enforcement system in the South Pacific.

That made child number nine.

Joanne is now 13.

And here’s the twist nobody saw coming:
Mona’s great-great-grandmother also came from Pinipel Island — population about 2,000 — and was probably from the Big Pigeon clan too.

So after forty years of fuel sales, planes, settlements, clans, aunties with knives, adoptions, visas and pure PNG chaos… the two girls may have been connected all along.

In Papua New Guinea, even the pigeons are running family reunions.

2013

Pink sari from the honeymoon

Mobil gala dinner 1000 in black



My life in PNG came in four stanzas. I came as a child. I came back with my first wife and first child. I came back again with my new wife, Kavita. And after COVID chased us out and I retired, I came back once more so Kavi could start her charity.

This is a story from the third stanza, and the lesson is simple: never rely on your new husband for fashion advice.

We married in Cairns, then flew to Malaysia for the reception, which conveniently doubled as a chance to drop the kids off for the school holidays. Romance and logistics in one move.

Then it was Kerala for the honeymoon. We floated around the backwaters on one of those big thatched houseboats, and somewhere along the way I bought Kavi a beautiful sari. Pink. Lolly pink. I was very pleased with myself.

From there we went to Singapore, where Mobil was celebrating 120 years in the country and opening a billion-dollar chemical plant with a gala dinner. The President of Singapore was there, the President of Exxon was there, and so were about a thousand other people.

Kavi asked what she should wear. I said traditional dress would be perfect, so the new sari it was.

We walked in, and a thousand people turned around. Every one of them was in black. Every single one. And beside me, glowing like a lit-up sweet shop, was my bride in lolly pink.

To be fair, it worked. She stole the show. All night there was a steady stream of Mobil executives coming over to our table to meet the new bride Paul had acquired, and by implication to admire my taste in saris.

I took full credit, of course. Kavi has never asked my fashion advice since.

2013

Mums Xmas letter after our wedding

Xmas 2013

“Dear Friends and Relations,
It’s that time again when we connect with absent friends and those we love the most and writing letters is a good diversion for a sunny and steamy day in Cairns that just doesn’t feel like Christmas. I would like to spend one where there is snow, where log fires are burning and where one could feel like eating a typical dinner with ham, turkey and Christmas pudding. .
Looking back this year in Cairns seems to one of frantic rushing around since Paul, our second son, came to town. He is so full of life and so hospitable, always taking us out somewhere or hosting dinner parties. He hired a large house in January so big it had “a stairway going nowhere just for show”. The house was situated in an elegantly landscaped golf course community where on 23rd November he married his beautiful girlfriend Kavitha from Malaysia. The wedding was ‘Bollywood Comes to Cairns” or “Monsoon wedding” complete with rain, all the women wearing sari’s - especially imported from India - and finished off with a fireworks display big enough for New Year’s Eve. Next week he is taking his mother and his sisters to Malaysia for another big bang. However it is not all a bed of roses – Kavitha has two young children Paul is now responsible for – quite a task. He is doing well so far I just hope he can stay young enough in heart to cope with them through their teenage years.

Paul with mother and sisters Sharon, Dianne and Anna Lisa on his Wedding Day

I am enjoying being a great grandmother because no one expects you do anything except sit there and be wise while watching grandchildren take of the little ones. I surprised an eighteen year old hairdresser a couple of weeks ago when she, trying to be polite, asked ‘How are your children?’ and I answered with ‘They are just fine because most of my children are already grandparents themselves’. She didn’t think anybody could be that old but I think it’s living in the tropics where people marry young and breed early.
In June I enjoyed a ‘trip of a lifetime’ paid for by my daughter-in-law Kaity to Russia where we sailed from St. Petersburg to Moscow on the M.V. Tolstoy – wonderful way to travel. We spent a few day s in those big cities where history, legends and beautiful buildings abound and where old communists make the most efficient capitalists. IN Tourist, previously a state organisation for visitors is now in private hands and takes care of tourists with skill and pizazz and knowledgeable and well trained guides.

The bride Kavitha and her son Rhohan

A Hotel on the Tolstoy Estate – Margaret with our Guide and Driver Sergei

In Russia I especially enjoyed a trip to Yasnaya Polyana, the country estate of the Tolstoy family – a journey back to a time before the revolution, the wars and the Communist Era. This delightful excursion into the countryside was marred by one small problem. The day before we were to leave Moscow I fell down the marble stairs in Lenin's tomb and broke my shoulder blade and three ribs. Consequently I got a glimpse of the shabby and inefficient state hospital system before being taken in an ambulance to a state of the art American Hospital, our travel insurance covered all that so it was worth paying for. However armed with pain killers and a determination to enjoy myself we carried on with our plans returning on Emirates through Dubai and managed to survive a fourteen hour plane trip back to Sydney. The rest of our family in Cairns, Including Noel, are all well and thriving and looking forward to the holidays and family times together. Much love to all and Best Wishes for the Festive Season."

Mums Xmas letter which refers to my wedding
I hv left the photo references in the body of the letter which are self explanatory

2014

Cairns olympics

2 passports needs two tickets

The Cairns Airport Olympics

As I left Cairns Airport after Mum’s funeral, heading back to PNG, I couldn’t help remembering another memorable departure from the very same terminal. Apparently, Cairns Airport and I have a long-standing agreement that no trip of mine shall ever begin calmly.

This was back when Australia and PNG had changed the passport rules. I was travelling on two passports with my brand-new Malaysian bride and my stepdaughter. We checked in, feeling rather pleased with ourselves.

The cheerful lady behind the counter looked at my documents and smiled.

“I’m sorry, you’ll need a PNG tourist visa in your Australian passport.”

My heart sank.

Then she uttered the most dangerous words in the English language.

“Don’t worry.”

Whenever someone says “don’t worry,” you should start worrying immediately.

She continued, “Just pop down to the PNG Consulate in Cairns, get the visa, and come back. You’ve got plenty of time.”

Plenty of time?

Clearly she’d never met me.

I jumped into a taxi.

“PNG Consulate—and wait for me!”

The driver looked at me as if I’d just asked him to keep the engine running during a bank robbery.

Ten minutes later we screeched up outside that infamous Conservatory Building. I’d heard stories about the formidable Hagen lady who ran the office. I was expecting a border guard crossed with a drill sergeant.

Instead, butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

As I scribbled my application in what doctors would describe as “perfectly acceptable handwriting,” she was already typing everything into the computer.

Efficiency… in a PNG office!

I wondered if I’d accidentally walked into the Singapore Consulate.

“The officer just needs to sign it,” she said.

He emerged from the back room almost on cue, signed it, smiled, and I was out the door before the ink had dried.

Back into the waiting taxi.

“Airport! And if you know any shortcuts, now’s the time.”

When I arrived, my wife and stepdaughter were already relaxing in the departure lounge, looking like they’d spent the morning at a spa.

I, meanwhile, looked as though I’d just completed an Ironman.

I handed over my passport triumphantly.

The check-in lady smiled again.

“Oh… one more thing.”

Those words are almost as dangerous as “don’t worry.”

“Where’s your return ticket to Australia?”

Of course!

On paper I was an Australian entering PNG as a tourist. Apparently tourists are expected to leave eventually.

“But I have a PNG passport too!”

She nodded sympathetically.

“I know… but the computer doesn’t.”

There it was again—that wonderful phrase.

“Don’t worry.”

She pointed upstairs.

“Just ring the Air Niugini town office. You can buy a return ticket over the phone.”

Really?

By now I had complete faith in this woman. If she’d told me to climb Walsh’s Pyramid to get my boarding pass, I’d have started jogging.

Upstairs I sprinted, bought the ticket over the phone, sprinted back down, dripping sweat, breathing like an asthmatic water buffalo.

My wife and stepdaughter hadn’t moved.

They looked cool, calm and collected.

I looked like I’d swum to PNG.

The flight, naturally, was delayed.

After all that frantic running, the plane had apparently decided to wait for me anyway.

Sometimes I think Air Niugini wasn’t testing my passport.

It was testing my cardiovascular

2014

Greg another tribute

Rebecca’s tribute at a media award in cairns 2 years after his passing

Rebecca’s Tribute to Her Beloved Father Gregg

I feel very proud tonight knowing my Dearest Dad is being honoured by his workmates in the Media World and to be able to tell you what sort of man he was for me…
My father was a very special person. He was the most wonderful father a girl could ever have. I know he loved me more than words can ever express and I loved him so much in return. He was the largest figure in my world and whenever I think of him a dozen pictures come to my mind. He was so much fun and made every event special for me.
My father made a movie of me and my dearest mother during the moments of my birth. And every birthday after that, when he was still alive he made a movie of a year of my life to show at my birthday celebrations. Those movies held an audience of my friends and family spellbound with their beauty. They were professionally made with background music and words that make me cry whenever I think about them.
Without my Dad things in my life will never be the same again. He will not be here to share with me my graduation or other milestones. Although I was growing up fast I was always ‘His little girl’. And I thought of him as my hero and my best friend. I knew I could always go to him when I was in trouble. I could always tell him why I was sad. He made sense out of the world for me and could always explain everything so well. He was not only a man who saw beauty in the world he had the ‘Gift of the Gab’ and all the things he told me always rang so true.
My heart was broken when my Dad passed away too soon but I am trying to be strong and keep my head high. I try for his sake to live my life to the fullest, to enjoy every moment and strive to be better than I am. I try to laugh and remember my Dad’s jokes. He had such a good sense of humour and could make a joke about everything. He taught me to smile when things go wrong and never never feel sorry for myself.
If I could live my life over I would choose my Dad to be my father again - even if it meant losing him again. It is worth all the tears in the world to have the memories I have of my Dad Gregg.
Thank you everyone for recognizing him and his work in the world of television. My mother and I are so happy to know he is not forgotten by his peers.

2014

Noel Bluett: A Life of Music and Faith

Noel

Noel Bluett – His story.

Born in Sydney in 1930 Noel became a professional musician in his teens and when he was eighteen he met a music teacher Avilda Reid from Adelaide whose family were Baha'is and through her was attracted to the teachings of Baha'ullah and became a declared believer in 1948 after being questioned by the Local Assembly about his sincerity he became a declared believer.
After he became a Baha'i he acquired a job in a band on the MV Manoora a ship belonging to the Steamships Company that travelled around the coast and in every port he looked for Baha'is and found them in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. Then in 1951 he encountered a student nurse and the first question he asked her 'Had she ever heard of the Baha'i Faith'.
'No' I said but he then proceeded to talk to me about it and for the next three days he didn't stop talking while I listened. Eventually he said 'You are a very quiet girl' impressive comment because no one had ever said that to me before. My biggest social problem was I talked too much but for the first time in my life I was silenced in awe.
After studying the Will and Testament every Thursday night at the Hazirat'u'l Quds in 2 Lang Road Paddington I subsequently also became a declared believer in 1951. We then decided to pioneer during the last years of the Six Year Plan to Leeton a goal town. In 1952 we travelled to Sydney for a Baha'i wedding ceremony performed by Hand of the Cause Mother Dunn and NSA Secretary Gretta Lamprill. In 1954 we moved back to Canberra and in 1957 a Local Assembly was formed in our house in Deakin.
In 1958 Noel was elected to the National Assembly and remained as Treasurer of that Institution until 1965. In 1963 he travelled to Haifa for the First International Convention and the Election of the first House of Justice. He was one of the 26 members who were the Tellers for that election.
In 1965 we became pioneers to Papua New Guinea in the Nine Year Plan with our five children. Both of us were elected to the first National Assembly of PNG in 1969, Noel became Chairman of that historical assembly and I became the first Secretary. We served on the Assembly for many years, Noel was appointed an Auxiliary Board Member in 1978 and I remained a member until 1989.
We returned to Australia in 1992 and served for a few years on the Local Assembly in Cairns.

TUPELA LAPUN NOEL NA MARGARET

Noel and Margaret are the parents of Paul Bluett, and Grandparents of Paul and Ione's five sons. They came to Papua New Guinea ten years after Rodney Hancock arrived. They went to live in Goroka in the Highlands. Noel was the first Executive Officer of the PNG Coffee Marketing Board and Margaret the mother of their five children, Michael, Paul, Dianne, Greg and Sharon. Their sixth child Anna Lisa was born in Goroka.

The Bluetts, like Rodney, came to New Guinea as a family to be pioneers of the Baha'i Faith to be self sufficient while spreading the message of unity and peace. One of their goals was to help form the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Papua New Guinea. When it was elected in 1969 Noel became the Chairman and Margaret the Secretary.

The Bluett family lived in Goroka for seven years and in addition to becoming part of the life of the town pursued the goal of making friends with as many local people as they could and visiting villages all through the Eastern and Western Highlands.

It was a bit easier for the Bluetts to befriend local people than it had been in earlier times because the Government policy was already moving towards Independence. But the social scene was still mainly segregated, only white people swam in the pool in the middle of town and only white people were members of the Sports Club.

By staying in villages and making friends with many local people the Bluetts showed they were not interested in adopting the colonial attitudes of the coffee planters at the time and so were marked as outsiders. Instead they made friends with local people who became influential men after Independence such as the prominent Tolais -Henry ToRobert who became the Governor of the Reserve Bank and Mr. Tongatia who became the Chief of Police in the Eastern Highlands.

Their presence and their efforts to teach the Faith of Baha'u'llah ignited a spiritual brush fire in several areas of the Highlands and by the time they moved to live in Lae there were almost three thousand Baha'is in the Highlands. The areas where the people responded to the new message were in the Bena, Asaro and the Siane Valley.

In the early seventies the Bluett family moved to Lae on the coast. In Lae they became involved in several different businesses such as buying the local laundry and dry cleaners, they started a video club, second hand shops and established Anisa Commodity Traders that mainly dealt in the exporting of PNG shells, lalai and talibung. They continued to work for the Baha'i community and traveled extensively throughout the whole country, visiting Baha'is and helping with local activities and development projects.

By the eighties they also had a real estate business running that was able to assist with the purchase of several properties including a new Baha'i Centre at Two Mile on the Highlands Highway. In 1983 they helped start a High School on the property that is still operating. The school provided education for children that were not accepted into other high schools but eventually acquired such a good reputation that many families sent their children to the school in preference to other schools because the Baha'is accepted children of all religions, it was not a school exclusively for Baha'i children.

Margaret and Noel moved to Cairns in 1992 but left behind them half of their family in Lae and in Rabaul. They have maintained strong ties with the people of Papua

New Guinea and always hold them in the greatest affection. Their youngest daughter Anna Lisa has a daughter who she has named Madina after the village in New Ireland where the Baha’i Faith in PNG was born.
Written by Henry Enn in Mount Hagen

2015

Mona

A short genealogy

Mona — A Pacific Family Puzzle

If you think filling out a family tree is simply a matter of writing down Mum, Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, you haven't met Mona's family.

Mona's family tree doesn't have branches. It has shipping routes.

It wanders through Rabaul, Matupit, Toma, Nissan, Buka, Anir, Baluan, Nauru, Tonga, Tuvalu, Fiji and China, picking up a few mysteries along the way.

And somewhere in all of this, two teenagers produced Mona.

Her mother, Trish Tirang, was only fifteen when she became pregnant. Mona's father, Kynin, wasn't exactly the responsible older man in the relationship.

He was seventeen.

So we had two children producing a child, and behind them enough Pacific history to keep a genealogist employed for years.

Trish's side

Trish's father was Peter Tirang, a Tolai man from Tavaliuliu, near Navunaram in the Toma area.

Peter fell in love with a young woman who had been studying in Fiji.

Apparently he was concerned she might return there.

His solution was not counselling, flowers or a carefully worded discussion about their future.

He threw away her passport.

Effective, perhaps, but not a technique recommended by modern relationship counsellors — or Immigration.

She stayed in Papua New Guinea, apparently without a passport or visa, making Mona's grandmother, technically at least, an illegal alien.

Peter and his passportless bride went on to have eight children. Trish was somewhere around number five.

But where had Grandma come from?

That is where things become interesting.

Her mother — Mona’s great-grandmother — had lived on Nauru. Her first husband was Nauruan. She later remarried a Tongan, and from that relationship came Mona’s grandmother.

And Great-Grandma herself was said to be from Tuvalu.

Except DNA has now entered the story and, like an uninvited auditor, started asking awkward questions.

Mona’s DNA doesn’t show the Tuvalu connection we expected.

So somewhere among the family stories, island migrations and marriages across the Pacific, there is another chapter still waiting to be uncovered. Oral histories are invaluable, but DNA occasionally walks into the room and says:

“Yes, but…”

What seems much clearer is the Tolai line through Peter Tirang.

Kynin’s side

Now we turn to Mona’s seventeen-year-old father, Kynin.

His paternal grandmother was Betty from Matupit.

I actually knew Betty long before I knew I would one day be trying to calculate her descendant’s DNA percentages. She worked at Bali Merchants in Rabaul and sold me magazines.

Life is strange.

You buy a magazine from a woman in Rabaul, and decades later you’re explaining to her great-granddaughter how she fits into the family tree.

Betty’s first partner was an unidentified Pakeha who apparently didn’t stay around Rabaul for very long.

They had a son, Kevin.

Kevin therefore carried both Tolai and European ancestry and became Mona’s paternal grandfather. Kynin, through that line, was half Tolai and half Pakeha.

But we aren’t finished.

Not remotely.

Enter the Seetos

Mona’s paternal grandmother was Leonie “Lee” Seeto.

The Seeto story takes us back to a Chinese ancestor who came into the islands and lived on a plantation on Anir.

His first partner was a woman from the Buka/Nissan area, from Pinepel near Nissan Island.

Their son Leo then married a woman from Baluan in Manus.

Their daughter was Leonie Seeto — Mona’s grandmother.

So by now the family tree has stopped pretending to be a tree.

It is a map of the western Pacific.

China to Anir.

Buka and Nissan.

Baluan and Manus.

Matupit and Rabaul.

Toma.

Fiji.

Nauru.

Tonga.

And supposedly Tuvalu, although the DNA department has lodged an objection.

And finally, Mona

After working through all those grandparents, great-grandparents, islands, unidentified Europeans, missing passports and teenage parents, my rough family arithmetic comes out at approximately:

37.5% Tolai.

6% Chinese.

6% Buka/Nissan.

Then there is the European, Manus and other Pacific ancestry — plus the mysterious Tuvalu story that DNA has so far declined to confirm.

Of course, human ancestry doesn’t always divide itself as neatly as family-tree mathematics suggests. DNA inheritance is random, and family stories aren’t laboratory reports.

But perhaps that’s the best part of Mona’s story.

She isn’t a collection of percentages.

She is the result of generations of Pacific people moving between islands, falling in love across cultures, studying overseas, working on plantations, raising large

families and occasionally making decisions that would give today’s immigration officials heart failure.

And somehow all those journeys converged in Rabaul.

A fifteen-year-old girl named Trish met a seventeen-year-old boy named Kynin.

And along came Mona.

The family tree had finally produced its tenth child for me.

Although, looking at the geography involved, perhaps “family tree” is still the wrong expression.

Mona is a family archipelag

2015

Mona

A Pacifics family tree

Mona — A Family Tree That Refuses to Behave

Trying to work out Mona’s ancestry is not genealogy. It is detective work across half the Pacific, involving teenage romance, missionaries, plantations, discarded passports, mysterious Pākehā, Chinese traders, Tolai villages and enough islands to require an Admiralty chart.

We begin with Mona’s mother, Trish Tirang, who was only 15 when she became pregnant with Mona.

Trish herself came from a remarkable family.

Her father, Peter Tirang, was Tolai, from Tavaliuliu near Navunarum in the Toma area. Somewhere along the way Peter fell spectacularly in love with the woman who would become Mona’s maternal grandmother.

And Peter apparently believed in decisive action.

Mona’s grandmother had been studying in Fiji and was supposed to return there. Peter, having other ideas about her future, reportedly threw away her passport so she couldn’t leave.

Romantic?

Criminal?

Possibly both.

In any event, she stayed in Papua New Guinea without a passport or visa and eventually she and Peter produced eight children, with Trish somewhere around number five.

So much for immigration paperwork.

But where had Mona’s grandmother come from?

That takes us another generation back.

Mona’s great-grandmother was said to be from Tuvalu and lived for a time on Nauru. Her first husband was Nauruan. She later remarried a Tongan, and from that marriage came the woman who eventually landed in Papua New Guinea, lost her passport courtesy of an enthusiastic Tolai boyfriend, and became Mona’s grandmother.

There is another intriguing wrinkle.

The family story says that many people associated with Tuvalu had Samoan ancestry through historical missionary movements and education links with Samoa and New Zealand. Whatever the precise historical explanation, Mona’s modern DNA results have added another mystery:

they show no obvious Tuvaluan ancestry at all.

The Pacific, it seems, has declined to make genealogy easy.

Then we turn to Mona’s father, Kynin.

He was only 17 when Mona was conceived, proving once again that this family did not believe adulthood needed to be fully established before beginning the next generation.

Kynin’s paternal side brings us firmly back to Rabaul.

His grandmother Betty was from Matupit. Betty worked at Bali Merchants, and I remember her because she used to sell me magazines.

Long before ancestry websites and DNA kits, Rabaul was small enough that your future adopted daughter’s great-grandmother might already have been selling you something over the counter.

Betty’s second partner was an unidentified Pākehā who apparently did not remain in Rabaul for very long. Their son was Kevin, Mona’s paternal grandfather.

Thus Kynin inherited Tolai and Pākehā ancestry through that line.

On another branch sits Leonie Seeto, Mona’s paternal grandmother.

The Seeto story stretches out through yet another chain of islands.

Leonie was about one-quarter Chinese. Her grandfather lived on a plantation on Anir Island. His second partner was a woman from Pinipel, near Nissan Island in the Buka area.

Their son Leo later married a woman from Baluan in Manus.

Their daughter was Leonie Seeto.

And Leonie became Mona’s grandmother.

By the time all these branches have been assembled, Mona’s family tree looks less like a tree and more like the route map of a Pacific airline.

There is Tolai from Toma and Matupit, ancestry running through Nauru, Tonga and the Tuvalu story, Chinese, Buka/Pinipel, Manus, and a mysterious Pākehā who appeared briefly in Rabaul, contributed to the family line, and disappeared from the historical record.

On the family arithmetic, Mona comes out at roughly 37.5 percent Tolai, 25% Polynesian 12.5% manus 12% Caucasian about 6 percent Chinese and Buka

And perhaps that is the real story.

Mona’s ancestry is not a collection of percentages.

It is a record of people moving between islands, falling in love where they were not necessarily expected to, studying overseas, working on plantations and in shops, raising large families, crossing cultures and occasionally disposing of inconvenient passports.

Every generation seems to have added another island and another plot twist.

Mona did not inherit a simple family tree.

She inherited the Pacific.

2016-2021

Princess of the deep

Mona, the Rapopo pool and a rescue in Cairns

Princess of the Deep

I had 7 children from 2 marriages, 5 natural boys, 4 born in PNG hospitals, 2 step kids of my new wife, who I brought up, but … we decided to adopt 3 more. PNG kids what else.

The youngest Mona, Rabaul mixed race was 9 months old (2016) and loved swimming, would only go to preschool in swimmers, hoping for a swim and then change to uniform at kindy.

She would sit on my stomach and wave regally as I did breast stroke on my back, up and down the Rapopo pool. I noticed she would look down in the water to understand how I motored along. At 2½ (2018) when she managed to swim on the surface she punched the air with her fist, “I got it!” 3x.

During COVID we got stuck in Australia. Mona’s Mum was in Malaysia visiting a sick rellie so I took her with our Sri Lankan nanny to Cairns to visit my Mum. First thing was to go alone for a cuppa.

Mona persuaded Sothi, 50+, to take her swimming.

The Air BNB had an unusual pool, deep end on the esplanade side. Sothi, a non-swimmer, stepped off the shallow end into the deep and started flailing!

Mona, 5½, thought she was playing but saw the deep terror in her eyes, jumped in and grabbed her collar, swam to the side and saved her — three times her weight!

Her favourite cartoon “Moana”, the Polynesian princess. She is 25% Polynesian, Tongan Samoan grandma.

Tolai mostly, some Matupit, Manus, Buka, Chinese great-great-grandad, a Pākehā great-granddad and rumours of a German catholic Father “father” if u get my drift, from Baluan island side of Manus.

2016-2021

From Warangoi with love

The jungle telegraph, and a baby who never cried

From Warangoi with Love

Kavi was very clucky. We couldn't walk past a baby, puppy, kitten or mildly attractive guinea pig without her making that look. You married men know the one — half smile, half biological ultimatum.

Our older daughter had gone away to boarding school and the house suddenly felt too quiet. Even the dogs looked emotionally available. "Let's adopt," she said.

Now in PNG this sort of thing doesn't involve websites, forms or social workers with clipboards. It involves the jungle telegraph — the most efficient communication system in the Pacific. Faster than email, more accurate than Facebook and powered entirely by aunties.

First, we took in a pregnant waif, but when the day came, she looked at her little boy and simply couldn't let go. Fair enough too. So, we kept waiting.

Then one Saturday in February the message arrived from Warangoi.

"There's a baby." The sales pitch sounded almost too good to be true: "Never cries." "Always happy." "Mixed race." Honestly, it sounded less like an adoption and more like someone advertising a second-hand Toyota Corolla.

We met with one grandparent from each side because the actual parents were extremely young. Agreements were reached in proper PNG fashion — respectfully, emotionally and with just enough confusion that nobody entirely knew who was related to whom by the end. We agreed to help with the young parents' education.

Three days later SHE arrived. No suitcase. No tantrum. No instruction manual. Just the clothes she was standing in. And that was it. Overnight she went from breastfed to bottle-fed without blinking an eye. We became besotted instant parents. Add water, shake formula, try not to panic.

Genetically she was basically the United Nations. Chinese. German. Pākehā. Tuvaluan. Tongan. Samoan. Tolai. Four PNG provinces somehow involved. We didn't adopt a child. We created a Pacific trade agreement.

She adored swimming. At kindy she'd insist on wearing her swimmers all day in case a pool appeared unexpectedly.

Then at five and a half, during COVID in Cairns, she casually rescued her Sri Lankan nanny from a swimming pool. Most children that age can't rescue their own shoes. But this tiny Polynesian torpedo launched herself into the water and dragged out a

grown woman like she was training for the Olympics. When I got back and heard the story: “Good Lord… we’ve adopted Moana.”

2019

Adoption again and again

Come with us

Ninth and Tenth Child

By now our family planning strategy had become remarkably flexible.

When Rhohan was ten, we sent him off to Malaysia to live with his father and attend an international school in Melaka. His dad was also looking after four or five male cousins, all connected through a Tolai mum. Kavitha's brother was the father, my employee, and naturally I was funding the whole exercise from our house in Melaka.

Three years later we moved from PNG to Australia. One of the cousins, the same age as Rhohan, missed him terribly. He cried and cried. Eventually we asked the obvious question.

"Do you want to come too?"

He answered faster than a politician spotting free food.

So off he came to Australia and the pair started boarding at Ashgrove Marist Brothers while we were still doing the PNG-Australia fly-in, fly-out routine.

At this stage Shahab was officially our nephew and unofficially one of our children.

The boarding experiment lasted about as long as a tropical ice cube. Rhohan decided boarding school was not for him and became a day student. Naturally we requested the same arrangement for Shahab.

The school replied, "No. His visa conditions only allow boarding."

Apparently immigration policy had never encountered our family before.

I was furious. So we withdrew both boys and enrolled them at Indooroopilly State High School, conveniently located a five-minute bike ride from our house in Chelmer.

Then I had a brilliant accountant's idea.

"If we adopt him, maybe the school fees will be cheaper."

As it turned out, state schools were already cheap and adoption came with absolutely no educational discount whatsoever. It was one of the few investments in my life that produced no financial return whatsoever.

We adopted him anyway.

The truth was that both Shahab and Joanne had been part-time, full-time, or somewhere-in-between members of our household for years. We eventually realised the paperwork simply needed to catch up with reality.

So in a strange way we got two children for the price of one adoption process.

Shahab became Child Number Nine.

Joanne became Child Number Ten.

Between natural children, stepchildren, adopted children, fostered children and assorted relatives who appeared and never quite left, our family tree began looking less like a tree and more like a mangrove swamp.

And as a final touch of PNG flavour, three of our ten children are either part-PNG or full-PNG.

Which means family dinners can involve Australian accents, PNG accents, Indian food, Chinese food, Tok Pisin, Tamil, English and the occasional heated debate over who finished the last piece of fried chicken.

Not bad for a family that originally planned on having two children.

2022

Sam

And donna

Sam and Donna

Yesterday, on the road between Bulolo and Lae, we passed the memorial stone marking the place where the late Sam Basil, Papua New Guinea’s Deputy Prime Minister, lost his life in 2022. It was a quiet reminder of how suddenly life can change.

Although I never had the privilege of meeting Sam, I learnt more about his connection to Donna during our visit to Wau. Sam was the half-sibling of Donna’s first four children, and Donna embraced him, treated him as one of her own. That simple act says much about the extraordinary woman she is.

Later that day, while visiting Donna at Haus Pikinini, I happened to use the room that had once been Sam’s. It was an ordinary moment, but knowing its history gave it unexpected significance.

Many Papua New Guineans remember Sam as a dedicated public servant who rose to become Deputy Prime Minister and worked tirelessly for the people of Bulolo and the nation. Donna’s contribution has been quieter but no less remarkable. Through Haus Pikinini she has opened her home and heart to orphaned and vulnerable children, changing lives one child at a time.

Passing the place where Sam’s journey ended, and then spending time with the woman who had loved and accepted him, was a poignant reminder that there are many ways to leave a legacy. Some serve a nation from Parliament; others serve humanity from their own home. Both can leave an imprint that endures.

May Sam Basil’s memory continue to inspire a spirit of service, and may Donna’s remarkable compassion continue to bring hope to children for many years to come.

2023

Elena

My faithful clerk come accountant



Elena Yaganegi
19/8/1942-18/7/2023

In 1980 when I bought my business in Rabaul Elena was the part time accountant, I made her full time and added to her duties clerical tasks completed by the previous owner, it was not long before they had their own business and a new car, on the night before the volcano erupted we and about 50 of her friends slept at her Nonga house “palawat vuvumadiring “ by the morning the volcano had erupted, we left 3 two wheel drive cars* and made a convoy of bigger vehicles.
Their car* was subsequently stolen, the defense force retrieved it from a checkpoint, police took it off the defense force and then a policeman took it home, somehow I recovered it along with two of my cars, by this time Habib and Helen had moved to Goroka without their car and were trying to reestablish a mail order video business, but walking everywhere, Habib had a crook knee. I shipped the car to Lae but a finance company AGC repossessed from the wharf, after a tense exchange and some arrears settled, the debt from a related company was muddying the waters ! to me a white collar, attempted theft,thwarted
My ex drove my car, I drove theirs from Lae to Goroka and returned their car.
Aunty Helen passed away yesterday, in Alotau a kind and happy soul, the story of their car was one of many in their 46 years in png, Her Alotau funeral is on Tuesday

and Kavitha and I are trying to attend
The Bahai community of Png will sorely miss her.

2023

Sean Dorney coffee

We found him in Chelmer



Sean Dorney

SEAN DORNEY — FROM VOLCANOES TO CHELMER, WITH COFFEE IN BETWEEN

PNG has a funny way of connecting people.

For decades, Sean Dorney was one of the great storytellers of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific — the ABC correspondent who seemed to turn up wherever the story was happening.

And, as it happened, so did I occasionally.

One of the memorable times our paths crossed was during the Rabaul volcanic eruption. While most sensible people were considering which direction was away from the volcano, Sean was there doing what Sean did — reporting the story.

I was there for rather different reasons. Rabaul was home, our businesses were there, our staff were there, our family history was there, and a considerable amount of our worldly possessions were disappearing under volcanic ash.p

Years later, after all those adventures around PNG, where should our paths cross again?

Not Rabaul.

Not Port Moresby.

Chelmer.

My own Brisbane suburb.

Sean became part of the local furniture — and I mean that affectionately. He was part of our touch group and our Arte Gusto coffee group, where the affairs of the world, PNG, rugby, politics and probably everybody who wasn't present could be thoroughly analysed over coffee.

Sean had spent a career reporting on prime ministers, coups, elections, independence movements, disasters, rugby league and the endlessly fascinating politics and personalities of the Pacific.

Chelmer coffee was probably tougher.

When Sean was awarded the AO, some of us gathered in his Chelmer garden for morning coffee and cake to celebrate.

It seemed wonderfully appropriate.

After all those years of television cameras, microphones, politicians and major events, here was Sean surrounded by mates in a suburban Brisbane garden, having a cuppa and a piece of cake.

No satellite link required.

Then motor neurone disease began progressively robbing Sean of his mobility — but certainly not of the affection and respect of his friends.

Our little community decided to do something practical.

We held a fundraiser to help Sean with the specialised chair and vehicle he needed as his mobility declined.

It was one of those occasions when the various tribes of friendship came together — touch football mates, coffee mates, PNG mates and local Chelmer friends.

Sean had spent much of his life telling other people's stories.

Now his mates were quietly helping him with the next chapter of his own.

There was something beautifully circular about it all.

We had first crossed paths with a volcano erupting behind us in Rabaul.

Decades later we were sitting around drinking coffee in Chelmer.

From volcanic ash to coffee grounds.

From Rabaul to Arte Gusto.

And through it all, the same Sean Dorney — intelligent, curious, knowledgeable, occasionally mischievous, deeply connected to Papua New Guinea and the Pacific, and enormously respected by the people whose stories he spent a lifetime telling.

PNG gave Sean plenty of stories.

Sean gave PNG a voice.

And Chelmer was fortunate enough to get him for coffee.

2025

Moresby modernisation brief

PNG overtakes Brisbane, all it needs is a sushi train

Moresby Modernisation Brief

2025, I flew into Port Moresby for a bank Christmas party, thinking I knew the place inside out after 46 years of back-and-forth. Well — surprise, surprise — PNG decided to put on its “Welcome to the Future” show just for me.

First shock: the grand sweeping staircase at the airport — you know, the one with murals big enough to qualify as national monuments — had vanished. Replaced by an escalator and a lift. Very modern. Very smooth. I half expected piped Mozart.

Then the arrival card I’ve filled out approximately 11,000 times? Gone. Replaced by an online form. I typed like a teenager ordering Uber Eats… and suddenly I was processed faster than in Australia. I nearly fainted.

Off I went to The Stanley Hotel — except, minor detail — it had magically transformed into the Sheraton overnight. And the lobby was closed for renovations. PNG hospitality: always keeping you alert. At least the BSP ATM had Apple Pay payWave.

At that moment, I realised PNG was now officially more modern than Brisbane. All it needed was a sushi train.

Meanwhile, in the newspapers and on Facebook: “SHORTAGE OF MEDICINES IN PROVINCIAL HOSPITALS.”

But not to worry — the PNG national soccer team was staying in my hotel, enjoying 5-star luxury. Apparently, the national health budget had sprinted, successfully, to the wrong field.

I did the rounds: banks, accountants, suppliers — all the glamorous staples of PNG life. Then I toured our new head office in Port Moresby.

Moving head office to Moresby after only 46 years — not rushing these decisions.

Had lunch with staff and even met my IT manager from the Philippines for the very first time. Lovely bloke. Amazing what Zoom hides.

Then came the airport trip home. I was stopped to pay the Green Fee, which instantly raised my blood pressure. I knew exactly where that money wasn’t going.

But I produced my PNG passport like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat: “Aha! Exempt!” A rare win.

Finally, I settled into the executive lounge, feeling triumphant, when a PNG staff member introduced himself — he was off to Melbourne to sit an exam for tank maintenance certification. See? Well-targeted funding does exist.

Then I landed back in Australia… and had to fill out my arrival card by hand. With an actual pen. Like a caveman. At this rate, when Australia finally launches its own online arrival card, I'll be able to say proudly, "Welcome to the club — PNG's been doing it for ages".

2026

Tok Pisin: Mind Your Bihain!

Kavi discovers the hilarious dangers of translating Tok Pisin literally.

TOK PISIN — THE LANGUAGE THAT KEEPS ON GIVING 😂

My wife Kavi is still wrestling with Tok Pisin.

I, on the other hand, have always found it wonderfully easy to make jokes in. It is colourful, expressive and occasionally completely dangerous if you translate it word for word.

When Kavi first started learning Tok Pisin in Kavieng, every day seemed to produce a new linguistic emergency.

The depot manager would cheerfully finish a conversation with:

“Lukim yu bihain.”

Kavi was horrified.

She heard: “Look at your behind.” 😳

For a while she wasn’t sure whether he wanted her to look at his backside, her backside, or whether employment at Islands Petroleum had suddenly taken a very strange turn.

Eventually somebody explained:

“Lukim yu bihain” simply means “See you later.”

Much relief all round. 😂

Then somebody announced:

“Mi laik go painim kaikai.”

Kavi heard the word “pain” and immediately thought there had been an injury.

“Are you all right?”

Perfectly all right. He was just going to find some food.

Then came:

“Mi sori.”

If Kavi complained that she was tired and somebody said mi sori, her instinct was almost to reply:

“That’s okay, I forgive you.”

Nobody had confessed to anything. They were simply saying, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Tok Pisin is like that.

It looks deceptively simple until you start translating it literally.

And English isn’t innocent either.

An expat lady struggling up a steep hill might tell a local carrier:

“Push me!”

Perfectly reasonable English.

But once two languages start rubbing shoulders, there is enormous potential for confusion — and PNG has been enjoying the results for generations.

Then there are wonderful expressions that English simply cannot compete with.

Liklik means little — except sometimes something described as liklik longwe seems to involve another three hours in a LandCruiser.

Hariap! is wonderfully urgent.

Isi isi immediately slows the whole world down.

And em nau! can mean anything from “Exactly!” to “That’s it!” to “Now you’ve finally understood what I’ve been telling you for the last twenty minutes.”

I once heard Tok Pisin described as one of the best-sounding languages in the world, and I can understand why.

English may have a larger dictionary, but Tok Pisin often gets to the point with far more personality.

It is hard to be pompous in Tok Pisin.

It is even harder not to be funny.

After more than half a century in PNG I still reckon some things simply sound better in Pisin.

And Kavi?

She’s still learning.

Still laughing.

And occasionally still wondering why everyone is so interested in her bihain.

Em nau… lukim yupela bihain! 😂

Back to Brissy to see my png kids 👶🏾

2026

Lae fuel tank trip

New road new planes new tank progress in Lae

Yesterday I was in Lae cutting the ribbon on a new fuel tank, talking to the media and trying to look as though I knew which end of the scissors to hold. I'll come back to that story tomorrow.

Today, though, I'm flying home.

One of the pleasant surprises of PNG at the moment is PNG Air. Not so long ago it looked like the airline was on life support. Now it has a new business model, a fleet of shiny ATR 72-600s and, at last, an aircraft whose name actually tells you something. ATR 72… seventy-two seats. There's a novel idea.

The old Dash 8s have finally bowed out. They served PNG faithfully for decades. Credit where it's due—Iambakey Okuk championed the purchase of dash 7 aircraft all those years ago, and they proved to be just about the right machine for the country at the time. But everything has its day, and now it's the ATR's turn.

So where did the money for the new fleet come from? The aircraft are owned through MRDC, which now manages the airline. MRDC is one of those organisations I'd describe as a quango—government-owned but run commercially, managing resource wealth on behalf of PNG landowners. Whatever you call it, it seems to be working.

They claim 96% on-time performance. I can't verify the statistic, but I can verify that today I don't have to fly back to Port Moresby just to get to Rabaul. Lae to Kimbe, Kimbe to Rabaul, and home in time for lunch. That's the way domestic aviation should work.

And speaking of progress, the drive from Lae to Nadzab is almost unrecognisable. Four lanes nearly all the way, with only the Yalu Bridge left as the bottleneck. It has taken close to ten years, the Chinese building it as the money arrived in dribs and drabs, but what a transformation.

The new Nadzab terminal is another surprise. Modern, spacious and with coffee that's actually worth drinking.

The only thing that wasn't modern was the computer system. It was down. No fuss. The young lady behind the counter reached for a handwritten boarding pass, carefully filled it in with a pen, smiled, and sent me on my way. For a moment I wondered if the captain would be filing the flight plan on the back of an envelope.

That's PNG. When the technology lets you down, the people usually don't.

We spend plenty of time talking about what’s wrong with this country. Today I thought I’d mention a few things that are going right.

2026

Hi speed diesel

The fuel game a new diesel type

HIGH-SPEED DIESEL

When we bought five depots from Mobil in 2005, life was relatively simple. We sold three products: petrol, diesel and kerosene.

Then kerosene slowly faded away and we were back to two.

Yesterday in Lae we went back to three.

We officially opened our first tank dedicated to what I'm going to call "high-speed diesel" — 10 ppm sulphur diesel.

Our traditional diesel is 500 ppm sulphur. The new stuff is 10 ppm. I was going to explain this using two bottles and 100 marbles, removing four from one and putting them in the other. Halfway through I realised even I didn't understand my example, so let's just agree that 10 is considerably less than 500.

Modern Euro 5 diesel engines are designed for this cleaner, ultra-low-sulphur fuel. It allows their emissions-control systems to work properly, producing substantially less pollution. "High-speed diesel" sounds better anyway — although I should probably point out that putting it in your truck does not give you permission to drive faster down the Highlands Highway.

This is our first tank dedicated to the new product and an important step for Islands Petroleum.

My son and I gave the speeches, I cut the ribbon and ceremonially opened the tank — which was slightly theatrical because, truth be told, we've already been using it for a few months. In PNG it is sometimes prudent to make sure something works before inviting everyone along to celebrate it.

There is another angle to this story. One of our existing suppliers won't supply us with 10 ppm diesel.

So perhaps you could call yesterday's little ceremony a shot across the bow.

I can say no more.

Except…

Watch this space.

Ps my plane left lae on time on the ground in Kimbe

2026

Hagen to Lae

On one bladder

HAGEN TO LAE — ON ONE TANK OF BLADDER

Planning a road trip from Hagen to Lae is not really about fuel stops. It is a carefully calculated journey between toilets.

The two male guards, the driver and I were fine—we could stop almost anywhere. Kavi, however, required facilities that were clean, safe and conveniently located, which narrowed the Highlands Highway down considerably.

Our first stop was Kundiawa Lodge, where the toilet door carried a very clear warning: K6 to use the toilet if you don’t buy anything.

The place had seen better days and the floor appeared to have its own mountain range, so we ordered lunch and earned the right to use the facilities as paying guests. Stage One successfully completed.

Next came the public toilet on the Goroka side of Daulo Pass, kindly provided by the Asian Development Bank. Buy the tissues, buy something from the local market, support the local economy—and Stage Two was safely completed.

In Goroka we pulled into the Bird of Paradise. The room wasn’t ready, so as compensation we received free afternoon tea, free dinner and free breakfast for ourselves and apparently half our entourage. Kavi bought a bundle of bilums, we fuelled up at the Kina Bank ATM, and I bought a bird outside the Bird.

By then I was buggered and slept until dinner. My watch congratulated me on completing enough exercise for the day, although most of it had been walking between the room, the buffet and the toilet.

The following day, Kainantu Lodge was perfectly timed for lunch—and another strategic bladder stop.

Then came the big question:

Could we make it all the way from Kainantu to Lae on one tank of bladder?

With careful fluid management, crossed legs and no unnecessary cups of tea—yes, we could.

The vehicle still had plenty of diesel.

The passengers were running on fumes.

Photos

The three places I lived in goroka, complete with my personal fire escape, my old tree house, my staircase to hell pumping water to the overhead tank and the school at west goroka is still there

2026

Colour Run

10,000 people turned up to block the city of Port Moresby

Before the sun had even considered clocking on, Port Moresby was already having a traffic jam. At 5:45 am. On a Sunday.

Now, in PNG, that's usually a sign of a fuel shortage, a visiting dignitary… or someone giving away free rice. But no—it was the we are one foundation islands petroleum Colour Run.

I abandoned the car in defeat while my long-suffering colleague went hunting for a parking space somewhere between Hubert Murray Stadium and Hanuabada. I think he eventually found one in another postcode.

The stadium was already bursting at the seams. There were runners, walkers, mums pushing prams, dads pretending they were only there to supervise, kids bouncing off the walls, and even dogs proudly modelling their event T-shirts. The Governor was there too, lacing up for the walk and enthusiastically telling me what a wonderful community event the Colour Run had become. He wasn't wrong.

Ten thousand people. Every conceivable shape, size and fitness level. The only thing they had in common was a willingness to start the day looking respectable and finish it looking like they'd exploded inside a paint factory.

Proceedings began with a prayer, followed by what can only be described as organised aerobic chaos. The best Zumba instructor in Port Moresby bounded onto the stage and somehow convinced several thousand people—mostly ladies, but with a fair sprinkling of bewildered husbands—to wiggle body parts that many of us had forgotten we possessed.

Then Kavi (Mama colour run)took the microphone. Her welcome speech celebrated ten years of the Colour Run, community spirit and bringing people together. I couldn't help smiling. After supporting the event for a decade, this was the first time I'd actually taken part in the Port Moresby run.

Off we went over the hill past the old Travelodge and around the headland. Before long came the first "initiation"—a cloud of coloured powder that transformed everyone from respectable citizens into walking rainbows. Five different colour stations later, nobody knew what colour shirt they'd started with.

The children, of course, saw an opportunity adults had completely missed. They gathered handfuls of powder from the road and gleefully reapplied it to anyone foolish enough to stand still. One enthusiastic fellow decided even that wasn't enough and simply rolled around in the coloured dust like a Labrador finding something delightfully smelly.

Back at the stadium the music was pumping again and thousands were dancing as though they'd just won Olympic gold for recreational happiness.

As for me, common sense finally prevailed. This old body—now accessorised with a brand-new knee brace and a fresh bandage where a skin cancer had recently departed—decided discretion was the better part of valour. I headed home for a long shower before someone decided I needed another handful of purple powder.

What a magnificent morning. Ten thousand people laughing, walking, dancing and proving that sometimes the healthiest thing you can do isn't chase a personal best—it's simply turn up, get ridiculously colourful, and go home looking like a badly painted lorikeet.

2026

Hagen Show

Not 80,000 dancers but still good

“For such a long time, I’ve watched people share the most beautiful photos of Papua New Guineans in their traditional and cultural dress, and I’ve always wanted to see and experience it for myself.

Well, today I finally did! Yes!!!!

It was even more beautiful in person. The colours, the traditions, the dancing, the people… I absolutely loved it. It brought me so much joy.

PNG has such a rich and beautiful culture, and the people are generally so happy, warm and full of life. Sadly, the economic pressures and hardships people face can sometimes bring out a different side, and I find that really sad because there is so much beauty and goodness here.

Anyway, today I’m just feeling thankful. ❤ Thankful to be here experiencing this with Paul, and so happy that Mona, Ian and little Hunter are here at the same time.

And of course… I’m making the most of my time with little Hunter! 🥰 I just love him! ❤

Feeling very grateful today. ❤”

Reposted with permission from kavitha

2026

Day 2 Hagen show

On the verge of trouble

High Intensity and Sudden Disruptions on Day 2 of the Mt Hagen Cultural Show

The excitement of the Mt Hagen Cultural Show on Day 2 took an unexpected and intense turn when a stone fight broke out among crowds, leading to lighthearted and cautious warnings from attendees that celebrations were pausing for safety.

While thousands gather to witness the breathtaking traditional singsings and vibrant displays of Papua New Guinea’s rich heritage, large public gatherings can occasionally experience sudden shifts in crowd dynamics. Incidents like stone fights serve as a reminder for spectators, families, and visitors to stay alert, steer clear of volatile spots, and prioritize personal safety while enjoying the festivities.

We left before the trouble but some in our group saw people running a sure sign of disturbance

In png if two ladies are fighting people run towards it but stone throwing I’m not so sure.

A special acknowledgement to Amesii Photography for the drone shot

A rival show set up in another field in plain clothes men linked arms and started their own sing sing and things deteriorated from there

The provincial government ran the show this year so an improvement on earlier years

2026

David Lidgett

Our lawyer got MEDIVAC ed

Due diligence was completed after we arrived in Rabaul — financial, legal and everything in between — but one of my strongest memories from those days was walking into the old Warner Shand office on Mango Avenue and meeting the man himself. His grey moustache carried the unmistakable yellow tinge of nicotine and he spoke with that old-school, plum-in-the-mouth voice that seemed to belong to another era. He prepared the contracts for the sale of the shares that brought us to Rabaul and became part of our story from the very beginning.

Years later, during the Asian financial crisis, a young New Zealand lawyer named David arrived in Papua New Guinea under difficult circumstances. He had signed his name to too many share transactions for friends who disappeared when things went wrong, leaving him to carry the consequences alone. Bankruptcy is a heavy burden for anyone, particularly a lawyer, and it closed doors for him back home. PNG opened another.

His Pākehā wife and their two children returned to New Zealand within a year, but David stayed. Rabaul became home.

Before long he had earned a reputation around town for helping people, often for nothing at all. He was the genuine patron saint of lost causes. I would regularly tell him, “Send me a bill, David. I can afford it.” He would simply laugh.

When I sold my customs agency business, we used Warner Shand Wilson for both sides of the transaction. Century Shipping, the buyer, said they were not paying the legal costs and my agreement said I was not paying them either. David looked at the situation, laughed, and somehow decided from that day forward that he would do almost everything for me for free — as though this was simply his lot in life. It certainly wasn’t something I had asked for, but it was entirely consistent with the man he was.

After the volcano erupted, while much of Rabaul resembled a Mad Max film set covered in ash, David calmly walked from Burmah Road to his office to retrieve important documents from his safe. We all marvelled at his ingenuity and determination.

I was bike riding with him on the road to Tokua when he suffered what appeared to be a serious medical episode, a stroke or perhaps a heart attack. After that, hospitals became an increasingly familiar part of his life. One day he looked up and noticed that the ECG machine being used on him had been donated by our charity. He took great comfort from that small connection and I remember the warm smile it brought him.

Then one day, while I was in Singapore, I received a frantic call from Suzy at the Rabaul Hotel.

“Paul, please help. David needs to be medivaced to New Zealand.”

I arranged a jet from Sunshine Coast , paid the bill, and David was flown first to Australia to stabilise him and then onwards by New Zealand air ambulance to Christchurch. By one of life’s strange turns, his former wife had been awarded the family home in their divorce and that house happened to be close to the rehabilitation hospital where he would continue his recovery. After her passing, their son inherited the home and David was able to stay there.

He lasted a few more years.

Today East New Britain mourns his passing.

David was a champion of the underdog. He helped countless people, often quietly and usually without reward. He gave his time, his skills and his kindness far more freely than most of us ever could.

The news of his death today came as a great shock, even knowing how unwell he had been for so long.

I considered him a brother.

Rest in peace, David. Rabaul, and indeed all of East New Britain, is a better place for having had you among us.

I now know why he was doing my work for free because one day he allowed me to pay him back

2026

Opera under the stars

A new office too

Some weekends remind you that progress isn’t measured only in dollars, but in people.

Last night we attended a wonderful opera fundraiser featuring three outstanding Australian performers—two sopranos and a baritone. To my surprise, I recognised most of the pieces, a reminder that good music has a way of staying with us. Our company hosted a table of ten in support of rural Catholic maternity facilities, a worthy cause that drew many of Port Moresby’s leaders. Between old friends and new friendships, the evening became as much about connection as it was about music. The venue at Don Bosco was impressive too, with its beautiful seminary-like setting creating the perfect atmosphere.

Yesterday also marked another milestone much closer to home. Kavi’s Foundation has moved into its new office at Rangeview, conveniently within walking distance of home . I discovered a little coffee shop where I can park beneath her office, enjoy a coffee, and look across to the magnificent PNG Bahá’í House of Worship. Some views remind us to pause, reflect and be grateful.

On Friday evening we attended Feast in our new sector. We arrived as newcomers and left feeling part of a community. It was special to share the evening with two members of the National Spiritual Assembly and a Counsellor, meeting in one of the buildings beside the House of Worship. The warmth of the welcome reminded us that community is built one conversation, one smile and one act of kindness at a time.

This morning we return for Sunday devotional service, another opportunity to recharge spiritually before another busy week begins.

The week ahead will take me back through memories. On Tuesday I fly to Bulolo, a place I haven’t visited for many years, before travelling on to Wau to catch up with Donna and see the wonderful work being done at her orphanage. That evening it’s the drive down to Lae, and on Wednesday we celebrate another milestone with the commissioning of our new Hi-Speed Diesel storage tank, introducing what we are now calling Low Sulfur Diesel.

Life has a remarkable way of weaving together music, faith, friendship, service and business. Each has its place, but together they create something far richer than any one experience alone.

Sometimes the greatest blessing isn’t reaching a destination—it is realising that every stop along the journey has been preparing you for the next.

2026

Kavieng colour run

Rain went away

Colour Run

Air Niugini and I have a complicated relationship.

This time it started in the executive lounge in Port Moresby, confidently waiting for my flight to Kavieng, when the announcement came: Cancelled.

No explanation that would improve my mood. Just a rebooking for 5.00 a.m. the next morning.

That meant a 3.00 a.m. pickup by the airport security vehicle, complete with two grandsons who were heading on to Rabaul. Nothing says “holiday” quite like setting the alarm for a time normally reserved for bakers and burglars.

Out on the Tokua tarmac sat what appeared to be an elderly F100. Its engines were covered with canvas, looking less like an aircraft and more like a museum exhibit awaiting restoration. Surely that couldn’t be our plane? It looked as though they were cannibalising it for spare parts. Somehow it felt like the perfect mascot for our cancelled flight.

Since I was unexpectedly marooned in Kavieng, I decided there are worse places to be stranded than my favourite island retreat, Nusa Island Retreat. A quick banana boat ride from town and paradise awaited.

Well… mostly.

A “budget room” was available. Budget referred to the facilities, not the price. The shower was cold and shared. The toilet was a composting affair that demanded both courage and faith. But the view? Absolutely priceless. Sometimes a million-dollar outlook makes you remarkably forgiving of plumbing.

That evening I joined our wonderful team of volunteers preparing for the Colour Run. Everything was ready. Nearly 3,000 shirts had been sold. Spirits were high.

Someone remarked how dry everything was.

“We could do with a bit of rain.”

Be careful what you pray for.

That night the wind arrived first. Coconut palms bent and swayed like they were trying to escape the island. Under my mosquito net I wrestled unsuccessfully with a mosquito coil that refused to light. Then came the deafening roar.

Rain.

Lots of rain .

Lying there, I imagined sheets of water drenching the course, three thousand brightly coloured shirts turning into soggy rags, volunteers standing ankle-deep in mud, and months of planning disappearing down the drains.

“We’re ruined,” I thought.

Before dawn the boat driver knocked on my door.

“Boat’s ready.”

“I’m not going out in this rain,” I muttered.

He looked puzzled.

He went away

I slept some more

I stepped outside.

Not a drop.

the gale was roaring through the coconut palms and surf. My imagination had kindly filled in the rest.

Relief!

I dressed in record time, swallowed a coffee, jumped aboard the banana boat, found a bus to the stadium and finally felt that fortune had swung back in my favour.

Not quite.

The driver seemed determined to collect every late entrant on New Ireland. One after another they flagged us down, proudly wearing their Colour Run shirts. Nineteen extra passengers squeezed aboard. It became less a bus and more a mobile reunion.

We eventually reached the stadium…

…just as the runners were streaming out through the gates.

Forty minutes late.

After cancelled flights, derelict aircraft, composting toilets, rainstorms and the slowest bus service in Papua New Guinea…

I made it.

The Colour Run, however, had beaten me to the finish line.

And I was the only white guy there

Next episode the run

2026

Bahai house of worship

Design features

A number of people asked about the design of the Papua New Guinea Bahá’í House of Worship featured in yesterday’s post.

The vision belongs to two architects: Henry Lape, from Papua New Guinea, and Saeed Granfar, of Iranian heritage. Together they created a building that is unmistakably Papua New Guinean while speaking a universal language of unity.

One remarkable feature I omitted yesterday is the building’s ingenious woven steel exoskeleton. Seventy-two steel strips rise from the earth and weave together to form the superstructure, creating a dome that is both exceptionally light and remarkably strong. The spaces between the woven steel admit natural light through carefully placed glazing, drawing the eye ever upward to the oculus—the circular opening at the summit where light pours into the heart of the temple.

The graceful entrance structures, inspired by the traditional Haus Tambaran, are not simply beautiful. They are an essential part of the engineering, providing the bracing needed for a building designed to withstand Papua New Guinea’s earthquakes and the strong winds that frequently sweep across Port Moresby.

Perched on its hill overlooking Port Moresby and Parliament House, the house of worship offers more than spectacular views. By all accounts, it possesses an extraordinary sense of peace and serenity. It is one of those rare places where architecture, engineering, culture and spirituality seem to merge into a single experience.

Perhaps that is the building’s greatest achievement. Thousands of individual pieces—steel, timber, glass and stone—come together to create something far stronger and more beautiful than any one element could achieve alone. It is a quiet reminder that people, too, are strongest when united while celebrating the richness of their diversity.

2026

Colour run to temple

As the sun set on our colour run we reflect d

After the Colour Run, we went to the Papua New Guinea Bahá’í House of Worship to watch the sunset and farewell the wife of our Madang manager, who had been helping Kavi. It was a peaceful and fitting place to thank her for her service and wish her well.

The temple is unmistakably Papua New Guinean. Its great entrance arches are inspired by the Haus Tambaran, the traditional ceremonial houses of the Sepik. Its interior is lined with woven metal strips, reflecting the weaving traditions found throughout PNG and symbolising many individual strands joined together in unity. Its carved wooden doors honour the country’s remarkable tradition of woodcarving and the skill of PNG artisans.

The House of Worship has nine sides and nine entrances, symbolising completeness, unity and openness to all people. No matter which direction a person comes from, every entrance leads to the same central place of prayer.

As the sun went down, the temple seemed to express something deeply Papua New Guinean and deeply Bahá’í: many cultures, many traditions and many people, woven together as one human family.

2026

Popondetta colour run

Oil palm cowboy country Kokoda etc

Popondetta’s First Colour Run

Around 1,500 people joined us this morning for Popondetta’s very first Colour Run.

After ten years, we finally gathered the courage to bring the event to Oro Province—and what a wonderful success it was.

Higaturu Oil Palms came out in force, with all its estates represented. Their children also gave a beautiful performance to Beautiful Sunday, bringing great joy and energy to the occasion.

A representative from Oro Provincial Health Authority thanked the sponsors, organisers and everyone who supported the event. Performers entertained the crowd throughout the morning and soon had everyone joining in—the spectators were just as eager to dance as the performers.

Traffic Police, three security companies, settlement youths and Islands Petroleum staff all helped protect the runners and manage the colour stations. Our team worked tirelessly, delivering drums and colour powder and ensuring every station was properly supplied.

At one mixed-colour station, a group of local youths respectfully supported our young female staff member and helped make her station safe, enjoyable and full of laughter. Our driver from Port Moresby also handled much of the logistics and colour mixing, constantly checking that every station had enough colour and that everyone was safe and well.

Our sincere thanks to our sponsors—NBPOL, Agmark and Papindo—and to BSP, Nestlé and Digicel for their generous in-kind support.

Congratulations, Popondetta. Today, Oro Province showed what can be achieved when communities, businesses, young people and public authorities stand together as one.

A beautiful morning in a beautiful province—and, we hope, the beginning of a wonderful new tradition.

Photos to follow

2026

Wau

Bulolo first

Wau

Life has a funny way of coming full circle.

As a child, my parents took me to Wau.

Years later, I took my own children to Wau.

Yesterday, one of those children took me back.

Three visits over more than sixty years, each one telling a different chapter of life.

The first was as an eleven-year-old. My parents drove from Goroka to Kosali Plantation to stay with Coffee Board Chairman Lloyd Hurrell. The next morning Lloyd suggested I accompany him into town for supplies.

So far, so good.

Then he stopped the LandCruiser, looked at me and said, “You drive.”

Automatic transmission. My first ever attempt behind the wheel.

A few hundred metres later we reached a long sweeping gravel bend beside the river. I discovered, in rapid succession, oversteer, understeer and blind panic. The LandCruiser completed what I considered a perfectly respectable spin before coming to a halt.

I was shaking like a leaf.

Lloyd calmly said, “Carry on.”

Today they’d probably call child protection. In those days it was called driver training.

My second visit was in 1979 when I brought my own children to stay at the Wau Ecology Institute. The butterflies were magnificent and, unlike my first visit, none of us attempted a pirouette in a LandCruiser.

Yesterday came visit number three.

My son and I flew from Port Moresby on Tropic Air for business at Forest Products in Bulolo. I asked if I could borrow a vehicle to visit Donna at the Haus Pikinini orphanage in Wau.

At Bulolo Airport we were met by not one but two vehicles—a hire car and a security vehicle.

Apparently I’ve reached the age where people think I require armed protection.

So off we went: driver, armed guard, my chief engineer and me. It felt less like a charity visit and more like I was inspecting the gold reserves.

Mind you, one of our three company vehicles had broken down on the road from Lae, so perhaps the security guard’s greatest value was that he knew how to push.

The drive from the Bulolo Valley into the Wau Valley was fascinating. Every few kilometres another medium-scale alluvial mining operation appeared, usually with an excavator happily digging away in the river. The recipe seemed fairly consistent: one excavator, one Chinese investor, one local landowner and plenty of muddy water.

Some people count coffee plantations. Others count churches. I found myself counting excavators.

Wau has certainly changed over the decades, but one thing hasn’t. It remains a place of remarkable stories, remarkable people and roads that still command your full attention—especially if Lloyd Hurrell has just handed you the keys.

2026

Kavieng

Where the bodies are buried

The Colour Run

The Colour Run began with great enthusiasm. My wife turned up armed with a camera the size of a small satellite. Every five metres she'd stop, zoom, adjust, crouch, stand up again, and then decide she'd rather walk. I wasn't sure whether I was participating in a fun run or starring in a National Geographic documentary.

I needed company, so I teamed up with the local thug.

Every town has one. Ours just happens to be my fuel dealer.

Nobody messes with him. He's fiercely loyal, knows where all the bodies are buried—figuratively… I hope—and his service station was closed because every one of his staff had volunteered. Apparently a free red T-shirt is more persuasive than an employment contract.

He looked like he could also use the exercise.

I proudly announced I was the only white bloke in the run.

Wrong.

There was another one—the fellow from our flight. He'd worn a bicycle helmet on the plane, presumably in case the safety briefing omitted, "In the unlikely event of a crash, please protect your head from the overhead luggage." His helmet was too bulky to pack because he was cycling to Namatanai, but he was lured into the Colour Run by the festive atmosphere. I bought him a lamb flap and found him a free T-shirt.

As the old saying goes, a favour done is a favour returned.

I'm still waiting to discover exactly how.

Halfway through town someone called out my name.

It was Terence Fong.

I hadn't recognised him at first. I'd done plenty of business with his father, Harry Fong, years ago. Harry spoke only Tok Pisin, but somehow we always understood each other perfectly. Sadly, Harry has long since passed on.

Terence greeted me warmly and then, completely out of the blue, offered me crabs.

For a split second I wondered if I'd wandered into the wrong kind of establishment.

Then I realised he meant the edible variety.

I gratefully accepted.

The course wound through Kavieng with music, laughter and every imaginable shade of coloured powder. One enthusiastic participant tried to take a shortcut.

Not on our watch.

A chorus of “Oi! Back here!” echoed through the crowd until the guilty party sheepishly rejoined the course. Honour restored.

We passed my old Mobil depot, where there’s still unexploded wartime ordnance lying around. Only in Papua New Guinea can a fun run pass relics of World War II without anyone batting an eyelid. The whole town came alive—car horns, sirens, cheers, children laughing, volunteers waving, everyone joining the celebration.

It wasn’t about who finished first.

It was about a town deciding, for one colourful morning, that having fun together was reason enough to lace up your shoes… even if you were walking beside a photographer, a friendly thug, a helmet-wearing cyclist, and carrying home a prize of fresh crabs.

2026

Early starts

Px

Waking up at the ungodly hour of 2:30am is literally trying to kill me! It's been a solid 3 weeks of this torture and honestly, age is not helping - it's like my body is saying 'remember when you were young and could sleep?'. Left Kavieng at the crack of dawn, 5am, heading to POM to catch my 3pm flight to Kimbe, because why not. The plane decides to take off at 3:30pm and instead of flying to Kimbe, we did circles around POM for 2 hours before landing back - because the scenic route is always fun, right? Flying in PNG, where adventure and frustration have a love child. Still, it's a beautiful morning and I'm off to Kimbe - fingers crossed the flight angels are smiling. Time to survive the Colour Run Kimbe, wish me luck!

Mama bilong Kala Run

My wife’s post

2026

Kavieng colour run

Stage 2

The Colour Run wrapped up at Julius Chan Stadium, which, like a few of us, is showing signs of wear.

I met the Mayor, who seemed a little awkward. The President of Tikana Council more than made up for it by being warm and welcoming. The Governor sent his apologies via a representative, as did the local Member. But the speech of the day belonged to the HR Manager from New Britain Palm Oil, the major sponsor. She must have stolen it straight from Kavitha's playbook. She couldn't wipe the smile off her face.

They called it the premier public event in the country this year. That's a bold claim, but after seeing the turnout I'm almost prepared to believe the hyperbole. Mind you, Kavi may use it as evidence that she deserves a better company car.

The sing-sing groups were fantastic. Every second group was begging for one more performance, while my social battery was flashing red. Time for the traditional Irish exit.

I found a truck with wooden slat seats heading to the Fisheries Wharf. K10. Better than Uber. Door-to-door service. The only downside was discovering that climbing out of the back now requires a level of flexibility I last possessed sometime during the Hawke government.

Back at Nusa, the coloured powder refused to come out in the cold shower. No surprises there. So I did the logical thing and swam from Little Nusa to Big Nusa and back. If the shower won't clean you, perhaps the ocean will.

Dinner was crab—kuka in Tok Pisin—and our boat was leaving at 4:30. The other passengers were a dozen women and one bloke training as a free diver. Their course sounded wonderfully simple: grab an anchor, jump overboard, go down to sixty feet, then come back up. I suspect there may have been one or two minor details omitted.

It reminded me of the old Bill Haley and the Comets song, Thirteen Women (and Only One Man in Town). Well, I had twelve women and one bloke, so close enough. They were all heading on to the Mask Festival in Rabaul.

Two banana boats, a flashlight to find the reef in the dark, and then onto an even bigger truck with even better wooden slat seating. Luxury transport, PNG style.

Kavitha was flying to Kimbe via Port Moresby. As I dropped her at the airport she sighed, "I think I need a day's break."

Those turned out to be famous last words.

Her flight took off… then turned around with an overheating problem. Welcome to another 5 a.m. departure.

That’s it.

I’m taking Qantas to tomorrow’s State of Origin.

At least if they turn around, they’ll probably apologise before breakfast.

My adopted daughter Mona and her three Nannie’s after the Rabaul colour run washing off the powder in the sea
Great minds

2026

The Dai connection

Chinese connections of 3 of our kids

The Dai People — Go Figure

As the sun rose outside the plane window and we headed home to Brissy, I wished I could say we were carrying good news with us.

Sadly, not much progress for Kim.

But we were very happy we had gone. And for Kavi, what began as a dash to the bedside of someone who had been like a mother to her turned into an unexpected mini family reunion. Ten of us converged on Melaka from different directions.

There are worse reasons for a family reunion. There are certainly better ones.

With so many of my PNG expatriate staff over the years having come from Malaysia, I decided it was about time I got my head around the country’s cultures.

And, naturally, its food.

What better classroom than Melaka?

But I digress.

My two stepchildren have three Indian grandparents and one Chinese grandparent.

Or so I thought.

Then we did the DNA.

Grandma’s ancestry made it clear there was more to the story. She was Peranakan.

Peran-what?

For centuries, Chinese men, many of them Hokkien-speaking, settled around Melaka and married local women. Over generations a distinctive Straits Chinese culture emerged — neither simply Chinese nor simply Malay, but very much its own thing.

The men became known as Baba and the women as Nyonya.

Peranakan — olsem hapkas bilong Malaysia.

And then there is Nyonya food.

Nyonya does not mean “none of your business”, although after several days of me asking questions about everybody’s ancestry it probably should.

It refers to the wonderful cuisine associated with the Nyonya women and their kitchens.

Don’t tell Elly, but the family sometimes refers to her as our Nyonya — our mixed-race lady.

So, in between hospital visits, there was serious cultural research to be done.

By which I mean we ate.

Early morning, before the hotel restaurant opened, I headed for a mamak shop. Mamak restaurants are the great Malaysian institution of Muslim Indian food: cheap, casual, often open around the clock and perfectly capable of serving enough curry and chilli at breakfast to make your nose run before the rest of your body has properly woken up.

Then came Malay breakfast: nasi lemak.

Coconut rice, sambal — nose running again — ikan bilis, those little dried fried anchovies, peanuts, cucumber, egg and, if you’re lucky, beef rendang.

By lunchtime we moved south to India.

Curry served on a banana leaf.

There is even etiquette. If you’ve enjoyed the meal, fold the banana leaf towards yourself.

I folded mine towards myself enthusiastically. No misunderstanding there.

Dinner took us back towards China: char kway teow, smoky fried flat rice noodles that disappear far too quickly.

And dessert was cendol — pandan-green jelly, coconut milk, shaved ice and dark palm sugar, sometimes with assorted extras thrown in for good measure.

Now we were getting into Nyonya territory.

Melaka even has another extraordinary community: the descendants of the Portuguese who arrived in 1511. More than five hundred years later, some still speak Kristang, a Portuguese-based creole, although sadly the language is now endangered.

Chinese, Malay, Indian, Portuguese — after a few days in Melaka I realised the place isn’t really a melting pot.

It’s more like a very large wok.

One little clue fascinated me. Sometimes you see people who look Chinese speaking Malay naturally among themselves. In Melaka that can be a hint that you’re listening to a Peranakan family whose roots have been intertwined with the Malay world for generations.

Which finally brings me back to DNA.

Thousands of kilometres away in PNG, our Mona has Chinese ancestry. Her DNA results also contain a tiny surprise: about 1% Dai, an ethnic group centred mainly in southern China, particularly Yunnan, with related Tai peoples extending through the borderlands of mainland Southeast Asia.

Interesting.

Then we looked at the DNA of my two Baba-and-Nyonya stepchildren.

Dai.

A tiny trace there too.

Now this was getting ridiculous.

Mona from PNG.

Two Malaysian stepchildren.

Chinese ancestry travelling through completely different family histories.

And somewhere, generations ago, little genetic footprints pointing back towards the same broad corner of southern China and Southeast Asia.

After decades of collecting children from different families, countries and cultures, I discover that DNA has apparently been quietly joining the dots behind my back.

So are they actually related?

Probably only if we go back far enough to require a very large family tree, several historians and another bowl of cendol.

But I’m not ruling anything out.

2026

Planning

Execution or how to get a daughter

Planning, Execution and the Daughter I Ordered

I have always believed in planning.

Execution is where things sometimes go off the rails.

My last properly planned child was conceived about forty years ago, around this time. The next one was definitely not in the strategic plan.

And somewhere along the way I had another idea.

I wanted a daughter.

After producing a succession of boys, I was beginning to suspect that conventional methods were not working.

Eventually I discovered the solution.

Marry a woman who already has one.

Why hadn’t I thought of that earlier?

And so Elly became my first completely successful plan for acquiring a daughter.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Before PNG, before marlin, before nursing and before I appeared in her life, there was Laos.

Kavi had pioneered there as a young Bahá’í volunteer, first in Vientiane and later Savannakhet. When the time came for Elly to be born, there was one small difficulty.

Hospitals in Laos rhymed rather too closely with chaos.

Thailand seemed the safer option.

Unfortunately, being young volunteers with limited money and complicated paperwork meant that getting the baby back into Laos was not quite as straightforward as leaving with one inside you.

So Elly’s international career began early.

She was smuggled back across the border under a blanket.

Some children get a passport stamp.

Elly got a blanket.

The paperwork caught up with her later in Malaysia, which seems remarkably appropriate for a child who would spend much of her life crossing borders and adapting to wherever she landed.

She learnt Lao quickly — quicker than her parents — and before long the small child was interpreting for the adults.

That should have been our first warning.

She was born in the Year of the Golden Dragon.

If you know, you know.

Strong-willed. Determined. Hard-headed.

In PNG we have another expression for that.

Don’t argue. You will only waste daylight.

Elly arrived in Papua New Guinea at six years old, and PNG did what PNG does: it adopted her.

She moved around the country with us — Rabaul, Kavieng, Alotau and elsewhere — collecting places, people and adventures along the way.

And she took to the sea.

Not little-girl fishing with a handline off the wharf either.

Marlin.

Madang. Rabaul. Kimbe.

Big fish, blue water and screaming reels.

There were tournaments and a few awards along the way. Somewhere between the little girl under a blanket in Laos and the young woman fighting marlin in PNG, my supposedly hard-headed Golden Dragon had become a very capable PNG meri.

Eventually she became a nurse.

That seemed appropriate. After surviving Laos, PNG roads, our family and marlin fishing, looking after sick people was probably comparatively straightforward.

Then she found a man.

A calm one.

This was important.

When your prospective wife is a Golden Dragon who grew up in PNG and catches marlin for recreation, calm is not a personality trait. It is survival equipment.

A year ago today, 15 September 2025, we celebrated their engagement.

And what an engagement it was.

Our house ceased being a house.

It became something halfway between Bollywood, Kuala Lumpur, Caracas and a PNG singsing after someone discovered fairy lights.

Marigolds and garlands appeared everywhere. Colourful umbrellas floated overhead. The furniture disappeared and a dance floor materialised.

The guests arrived in an explosion of colour.

Indians in magnificent saris. Chinese friends in Malaysian Peranakan outfits. Persians, Africans, Malaysians and Caucasians all mixed together.

It reminded me strangely of PNG.

Nobody quite sure where everybody originally came from, but after five minutes nobody particularly cared.

Then came the food.

We had three caterers representing three different worlds.

The Indian chef was cooking rotis fresh on site with curries and dishes coming off the stove faster than we could identify them.

The Malay food brought another whole collection of flavours.

Then the Venezuelan desserts arrived looking so beautiful that for a moment nobody wanted to eat them.

That moment passed.

Then Bollywood started.

The furniture had wisely already been removed.

Everyone danced, but the nurses were in another league entirely.

I have spent a lifetime watching Papua New Guineans dance at singsings, weddings, openings, farewells and occasions where nobody was quite certain what we were celebrating.

I know commitment when I see it.

Those nurses were committed.

An uncle took over as MC and the two mothers began telling stories about the bride and groom.

This is always dangerous.

Parents possess classified information.

Mothers possess the nuclear codes.

There was laughter, embarrassment and the occasional expression on the couple’s faces that clearly said:

Why did we agree to this?

And through all of it sat the two people we had actually gathered to celebrate.

My spirited daughter and her calm, steady partner.

Looking around that room, I realised how extraordinary the journey had been.

A Malaysian mother pioneers to Laos.

A baby is born in Thailand.

She makes her first clandestine border crossing under a blanket.

She grows up partly in Papua New Guinea.

She learns to fight marlin in the Bismarck Sea.

She becomes a nurse.

And eventually people from half a dozen cultures gather under one roof to celebrate the man she has chosen to marry.

I had wanted a daughter.

My planning wasn’t particularly good.

The execution was even worse.

But PNG taught me long ago that the best journeys rarely follow the original plan.

Sometimes the road washes out.

Sometimes the volcano erupts.

Sometimes the boat doesn’t arrive.

And sometimes the daughter you always wanted arrives six years old from Laos.

Forty years after I thought I had finished planning children, I have finally learnt the lesson.

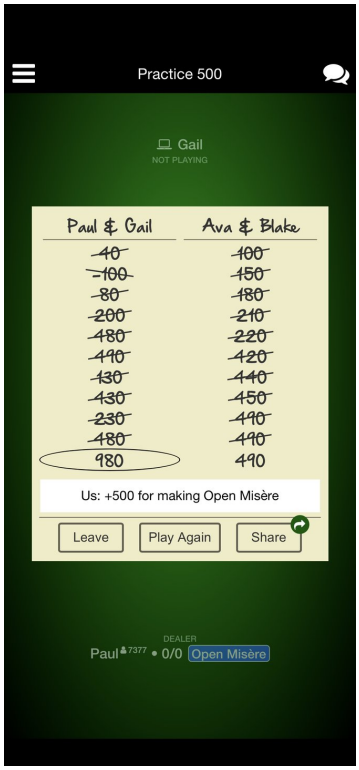
Make the plan if you must.

Then stand aside and see what life has organised instead.

2026

Passing time at the hospital

An app on my phone



Screenshot of my score

Dispatch from the Waiting Room

Lads, apologies for missing fortnightly cards in Brissy. I'm stuck in PNG, parked in a hospital waiting room while my mate gets his fused vertebrae sorted. Between the plastic chair and the cafe wall, my back was literally against it. So I opened the practice 500 app to pass the time, and my back went against the wall there too.

Picture it. Me and Gail (a laptop, but very supportive) versus Ava and Blake, two bots with no mercy and no small talk. Both teams in the high 400s. One good hand from them and I'm done. So I did what any sensible man would do: I bid something ridiculous. Went down like a dropped coconut, from 490 to 130. Did I learn my lesson? No. Clawed back to 430, bid stupid again, dropped to 230. Clawed back again to 480.

Meanwhile Ava and Blake sat on 490 twice, needing just ten measly points, and I kept refusing to let them have the bid. Like a toddler refusing to hand over the TV remote.

Final hand. They bid 8 hearts. My hand looked like it had been dealt by someone who disliked me. Only one thing left to do: Open Misère. Cards face up on the table,

no tricks allowed, full public humiliation available. The kitty took pity on me, Ava and Blake held all the wrong cards, and I didn't win a single trick.

Plus 500. Final score: 980 to 490. Mi winim!

The nurse asked why the old fella in the corner was punching the air. I told her it was a medical miracle. In a way, it was.

Save me a seat next fortnight. My bidding is as reckless as ever. 🃏

Undated

From Haus Boi to Haus Meri: Sixty Years of Change in PNG

Vera

Haus Bois and Haus Meris

In 1965 my mother, bless her soul, recruited our haus boi virtually off the street in Goroka. He had very little formal education, but that was how things were done then.

Sixty years later my haus meri is high-school educated, speaks impeccable English, and can discuss Greek mythology with me. The other day she surprised me by doing something clever on her smartphone that I didn’t know how to do.

She even owns the smartphone herself.

An Android, mind you. We must maintain standards.

Back in Goroka, Saturday morning meant the market. Mum would set off carrying forty shillings rolled neatly in paper. We children followed meekly behind, contributing almost nothing except numbers.

Everything seemed to cost a shilling.

A shilling for the mangi here, a shilling for vegetables there, another shilling for something Mum had spotted, bargained over and bought. Somehow the forty shillings filled the kitchen.

By 1977 I was back in Lae, this time not as a child following my mother but as a married man with a susu pikinini of my own.

Naturally, we had a haus boi and a nanny.

The haus boi discovered fairly quickly that dealing with the contents of cloth nappies had not been mentioned in the job interview.

He also discovered the cashew nuts I had carefully put aside for a dinner party.

The nappies he avoided.

The cashews he did not.

Eventually, in Rabaul, we employed a Morobe meri called Giwi. She had little education, several missing teeth and plenty of character.

Then came Vera.

And Vera became something much more than a haus meri.

Her daughter Matilda also worked for us as a nanny, and over perhaps ten years these women helped us raise five boys. Anyone who has raised five boys will understand that the word “helped” is doing a great deal of heavy lifting in that sentence.

Vera was Sepik. Tough, loyal, hardworking and utterly woven into the fabric of our family.

When one of the notorious Sepik raskol leaders was shot by police, Vera came to us looking genuinely worried.

“Who will protect us now?”

That was the day I discovered that apparently we had been under protection.

Nobody had bothered to tell me.

Perhaps that explains why those years seemed such a golden era.

We looked after Vera as best we could. Medicine, clinics, treatment for her children — whatever was needed. At one stage that even included treatment for an infection she had caught from her husband, who had apparently acquired it through some extracurricular activity in the settlement.

Her marriage had been arranged. Her husband was much older, violent and, to put it politely, not one of civilisation’s great success stories.

Her son Andrew occasionally broke into our house.

Family loyalty in PNG can be complicated.

But Vera herself was absolutely loyal to us.

In 1989 she travelled to Lae to help look after two of the boys while we took the older two off to inspect what would become their new digs in Canada.

Then came the volcano.

During the put-put evacuation we suddenly found ourselves with five extra children. In the middle of all that confusion Vera came to us carrying a baby.

“If this baby doesn’t get milk, it’s going to die.”

There are moments during disasters when everything else becomes irrelevant.

Find milk.

Save baby.

Next problem.

After the 1994 eruption, government assistance allowed many displaced people to leave Rabaul. The squatter settlements had been devastated. Families who possessed almost nothing beforehand somehow managed to lose even that.

And I faced one of the hardest decisions of those years.

We needed somebody local. Tolai women had traditionally been reluctant to take domestic work, but the eruption changed the economy, the town and the old social patterns.

I decided we had to let Vera go.

I placed an advertisement in the Post-Courier trying to find her work in Lae.

Nothing.

And that was when it really hit me.

I cried.

Not politely.

Not a dignified tear sliding down the cheek of the expatriate businessman.

I cried until my throat hurt.

Because beneath all the drama of the volcano — the houses destroyed, businesses damaged, roads buried, families scattered — were people like Vera.

People who had the least to begin with and lost the most.

For a time she slept in cardboard boxes underneath someone’s house in Lae.

Eventually she became caretaker of the Bahá’í Centre there.

Apparently the way she ran the place caused some amusement among the locals.

They took one look at the spotless floors, the organisation and the discipline and announced that this woman had clearly been “trained by a missus.”

I’ll take that as a compliment.

Later life was not especially kind to Vera.

She ended up in Madang and, from what I was told, spent periods walking the streets, deeply unhappy. I arranged for her to collect a pension from our branch there.

I never completely understood what had happened inside her.

But then perhaps that was part of the problem.

I was the expatriate employer who thought he knew her because she had spent years inside our home.

She probably knew far more about us than we ever knew about her.

She knew our children.

She knew our fights, our habits, our cupboards, our visitors and probably every family secret worth knowing.

She helped raise our boys.

She worried about abandoned babies.

She protected our household while apparently believing some raskol somewhere was protecting her.

Her own life could be terribly hard, yet she kept turning up and looking after everybody else.

Vera has now gone to the great haus kunai in the sky.

And when I think about those years, I realise that the history of our family in PNG wasn’t just written by the people whose names appeared on the company letterhead or the family tree.

It was also written by women like Vera.

Women who washed the nappies, cooked the meals, minded the children, survived violent husbands, volcanoes and displacement, and somehow still had enough heart left to worry about whether somebody else’s baby had milk.

The volcano destroyed our house.

It destroyed plenty of other things too.

But one of the things it taught me was this:

The people living in the biggest houses did not necessarily have the biggest hearts.

Vera did.

And I will never forget her.