

# Christmas at Balgo Hills



**KJ (Tim) McDonald**



## **Prologue**

During the 1975-1976 Christmas Holidays three of us spent 30 days at an Aboriginal mission in the far northeast of the state of Western Australia. At the time I was the Headmaster of Marist Senior College in Churchlands, a suburb of Perth. Vincent Ryan was the Principal of Bunbury Catholic College and Dennis Cooper taught there as well. We were in our mid-30s. We were all Marist Brothers, members of a Catholic religious teaching order with 26 schools spread across the south of Australia from lower New South Wales and Victoria to Perth – our southern or Melbourne Province, complementing the northern or Sydney Province with schools from Sydney to Brisbane.

I kept a diary of our experiences in a carbon paper book and every six pages or so I mailed a section to various people, retaining the carbon copies for myself. Henry King, my brothers Terry, John, Phillip, my friends (Father) Des Panton and (Brother) Evan O'Halloran, my Provincial boss Brother Cletus Read, were all treated to several hand-written pages with no introduction or conclusion, I guess they were a little confused at times!

Seven months before, in the break between school terms, I had joined one of the Newman parents, Henry King, together with Brother Terry Gleeson and Henry's two teenage sons, Greg and Christopher, on a 17 day four wheel drive trip to Broome, then Darwin, then Alice Springs, then across country to Kalgoorlie and home to Perth. Vincent, Brother Dick Marius and I had been to Broome by car a year before and Vincent, Dick and I also went to Kalbarri and Port Hedland another time. I love the outback and these quaint fringe "cities". The trip with Henry King led to a fascination with the Aboriginal reality, part-bloods for the first 1,000 miles as we travelled north then full-bloods as we travelled Broome to Warburton near Kalgoorlie. Balgo Hills for Christmas sounded wonderful – total isolation deep in the ancient Kimberley.

Henry generously loaned us his four wheel drive Toyota half truck and off we went on Wednesday December 17<sup>th</sup>. The wet season was just beginning up north so we hoped we could make it through.



Our destination – the Kimberley

The Kimberley is an area of 424,000 sq. km. or 164,000 sq. miles, making it almost as big as California and twice the size of England. The Kimberley has an Aboriginal history dating back at least 40,000 years and continues to be home to Aboriginal groups practising traditional law in the world's oldest continuous culture. There are just six towns but dozens of Aboriginal communities and stations, yet there is a huge feeling of solitude and emptiness.

For us, in 1975, the largest town is Broome with a mixed race population of almost 2,000. Next in size is Derby with about 300 whites and a mobile population of several hundred blacks. Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek both have about 100 whites and an even bigger population of Aborigines moving between the missions or the camps or the towns. Kununurra is a new town, built to service the Ord River Irrigation scheme developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. About 20% of that 500 head population is black. Finally, as one travels the road from Broome to Darwin there is the very old town of Wyndham. Its population of less than 100 whites but more

than several hundred blacks, is on a slow decline. Altogether the Kimberley population is maybe 3,000 non-black and 30,000 blacks.

Although Highway 1 circles the whole of Australia, generally close to the ocean, there is little traffic on it in the Kimberley since extensive sections of the highway are not sealed, but pot-holed and causing many a flat tire. The next garage, if it merits that name, may be many miles away. Tourism, fueled by the advent of four wheel drives, mobile homes and sophisticated caravans was still 15 years in the future, waiting for the explosion of the geriatric population that cared nought about such problems. Then there is the wet season coinciding with the Christmas school holiday period, deterring families from braving the outback on their annual holidays, particularly this, its crowning jewel - yes, a geriatric couple's wonderland, young-uns stay home!

Perth to Broome is 1,100 km or 680 miles and Broome to Wyndham near the Northern Territory border is 2,048 km or 1,272 miles and its then another 990 km or 615 miles to Darwin. The climate ranges from semi-tropical to tropical, heavily influenced by a monsoon season making the usual four seasons just Wet (November to January) or Dry (the rest).

### **Wednesday December 17<sup>th</sup>**

I borrowed an electric alarm clock the night before and so was able to wake up at 4.30 a.m. Vin and Dennis were easy to wake up, I am the reluctant riser. We left Perth at 5.20 a.m. and were at the highway 1/95 fork at 7.50 a.m., 109 miles later. Highway 1 meanders along the coast, we fortunately took the 95 directly north.

Smooth sailing to Dalwalinu, refueled with 13 gallons, some ice and 3 polly waffles, and on to Mount Magnet, another 15 gallons and some rolls for lunch. 361 miles – good going. We had lunch under a tree, got the tables and chairs down off the roof, Vincent broke our democratically agreed rule – wouldn't have a beer! Around us is semi-desert affording some grazing for cattle, you can call it pastoral country.

At 4.00 p.m., after 443 miles, the right hand back tyre blew – we were only 30 miles out of Meekatharra and we went straight to the guy who fixed our windscreen last May. We were away from Meeka at 5.30 p.m. – 9 gallons of fuel and \$70 for the tyre – so the whole operation only cost us about 45 minutes of travelling time.

Weather cloudy and windy but not terribly hot. Good for travelling. Played The Beatles, John Denver, Olivia Newton-John and some new music unsuitable for oldies, viz. Steeleye Span, Pink Floyd, George Harrison.

At 6.30 p.m. we pulled off the road about 200 yards behind some trees – got down the table and chairs, lit a fire, had a couple of beers, then steaks, vegetables, etc., brought back old times. 533 miles travelled.

### **Thursday December 18<sup>th</sup>**

Slept quite well. A few ants – sticky little blighters! Dennis slept in the back of the wagon, Vin slept under the left side and the water dripped and wet his sleeping bag through. I slept under the stars – very windy night, a few raindrops.

Up at 5.00 a.m. – I was the last to rise, surprisingly! Baked beans and coffee and we were away by 6.05 a.m. Electric frigerator stopped working so we left the gas option on – cuts out periodically.

Puddles and mud patches on the road, lots of rain clouds, beautiful weather for travelling. We got 13 gallons of petrol – 85 cents a gallon – at Kumarina road house. The left hand rear tyre blew 6 miles south of the Mount Newman turnoff and 1 mile south of the Capricorn garage. Again we lost less than an hour and \$80.

Took in 14½ gallons at Nullagine road house after crossing the Fortescue river twice and some smaller creeks, all normally bone dry but now lots of still and running water around. Slow progress but no worries.

Camped in a depression dug out by the road builders after doing 392 miles for the day. The country between Roy Hill and Marble Bar is absolutely desolate but it becomes quite pretty north of Marble Bar. Camped about 6.40 p.m.

Very windy night and rain threatened. Dennis slept in the truck again, Vin slept on the roof safe from dogs, cows and snakes. I got eaten by mosquitoes out on the ground but the peace and quiet is great, the stars stupendous. Have played “night prayers” religiously – translated as a couple of beers and tall stories.

## **Friday December 19<sup>th</sup>**

Up at 5.30 a.m. but left at 7.00, crossed rivers, creeks and puddles slowly, the wet season gradually descending on us. Hit the bitumen 20 miles west of Port Headland at 10 a.m., 1032 miles from Perth. Straight through Hedland, not much there, (the mining boom still just gathering momentum), soon back on a gravel road, held several conferences with transport drivers and one actually road guardian angel on us for the next 40 miles. We forded two tributaries of the De Grey river with the water on the running boards and a reminiscent lurching over hidden pot holes and rocks. Crossed the actual De Grey on the Mount Goldsworthy railway (that brings the iron ore to Port Hedland), thank God for the planks laid over the ends of the sleepers. We inched our way across, the 20 mile wide flooded river and plain beneath us.

Our guardian angel left us then to drive on to Shay Gap, we, with one more river to cross, went on to Broome. That one river was the deepest but in we went. We were grateful for the clearance given by the Toyota Land Cruiser but some sedans were going through – if they stalled and the water went up their exhausts it would be all over. We even saw one guy on a motor bike – maybe we were the last to! The main petrol tank ran out about 100 yards before this last stream – a quick changeover to the reserve tank and on we went, fearless by now.

We filled only the main tank at Sandfire road house – at about 95 cents a gallon! Had a couple of beers with the old guy who lived there. Life is pretty quiet in the wet season. Slew no beasts, cattle or kangaroos, with that mighty bumper bar protecting our radiator. Reserve tank ran out about 166 miles after we turned it on. We camped in a beautiful little sandy cul-de-sac about 80 miles from Broome. Finished off the meat, had a few cold beers. Again eaten by mosquitoes and smattered with a few raindrops. The rivers and streams were being fed by the monsoons to the north but the torrential rain was headed our way!



## **Saturday, December 20<sup>th</sup>**

But up at 5.30 a.m. (them) and 6.00 a.m. (me!) and away by 7.00 after rice bubbles and coffee. Wood for fires, lights all work, plenty of music, plenty of jokes, good road. All in all a really good trip with just a few hairy moments.

We were in Broome by 9.00 a.m. and headed straight for the Bishop's presbytery. But the Bishop had flown off to somewhere at dawn. So we had a chat with (Fathers) Mike McMahon and John McGuire, the former serviced Broome, the latter the Beagle Bay mission, and had a swim at Cable Beach. It was high tide and a bit of surf was up, the water no more than 10 yards from the cliffs. The last time I was here with Henry King etc., the beach was 200 yards wide (and it's 14 miles long).

By now eight in number we had lunch at the Tropicana, a new restaurant, and left there at 3.00 p.m., and I am now writing this. Mike McMahon told us he rang the Bishop and he will fly us out tomorrow – but maybe we'll go up to Beagle Bay for the day and fly out on Monday. Driving the 500 plus miles to Balgo Hills is now impossible, the wet season has arrived.

John McGuire built Balgo Hills mission in 1961 and so we were able to get a complete rundown on its history. It is the biggest cattle station in Australia now that the Queensland ones have been quartered into smaller stations by state government decree. Balgo Hills is populated by 700 aborigines and has a hospital, school, etc. – the northern equivalent to Warburton (where we got petrol in the middle of a war between two tribes on our previous trip with Henry – I hoped that wasn't the case at Balgo!). Apparently we will be painting the convent and possibly the dormitories. I hope we can get out on the station a bit and see around.

Anyway, so ends the report of the trip north. We were told at Mount Newman that the coast road (Highway 1) was cut in three places and, outside Port Hedland, that the Meekatharra road we used had just been closed. Wittenoom is now completely isolated. So how we picked the right days to come is the question!

Broome had a thunderstorm that evening from about 5.00 to 7.00 p.m. We went to 6.00 p.m. Mass and listened to the downpour with considerable relief since we could so easily have still been out in it. Broome copped 3" of rain that evening. None of the buildings have gutters, they would be useless in the wet season, each was surrounded by mini-Niagara Falls as we stood watching, bone dry.

During Mass they used an overhead projector for the hymns, responses, etc., rather a good idea since they can introduce variety into various parts. After Mass we had tea in the St. John of God hospital with the nuns and had a bit of a natter. One of the nuns knew Dennis from his time teaching in Northam. (Little did I know of my future with the St. John of God hospitals, although this Broome one would be closed by then.)

We adjourned to the presbytery for a beer and a talk. A young part – Aboriginal – Chinese – Japanese guy called Tony Lee came by. He seemed to be good mates with Chris Saunders who is a deacon and will be ordained a secular priest for this diocese next August, their first secular priest since all the others are members of the Pallotine religious order. Chris is in training in the Adelaide seminary but originally came from Melbourne. He was a student at Monash University in Melbourne and became involved with Aboriginal youths and got the call – a nice relaxed guy. Talk centered around the Aboriginal problems naturally and the fascination of Broome. The more I see of Broome the more incredible it becomes.

Broome's population is a mixture of races, about 27 altogether – Filipinos, Malays, Chinese and Japanese from Asia plus many European cultures, the British Isles, Australians and of course, the Aborigines – and there are several tribes. All except the blacks the legacy of the pearling industry of the last century. Most of the townspeople have some Aboriginal blood in them, although there are white families that have been here for 80 to 100 years and who eschew some sort of patronizing attitude to the Aborigines and castes rather than true friendship. Still, there isn't a real race problem and the inter-marriages increase, perhaps that's the answer. (Little did we suspect that tourism would soon totally destroy the charm of old Broome.)

Broome has a government primary and secondary school as well as Catholic primary and secondary schools run by nuns and Christian Brothers. The Catholic schools are on the same property and are heading towards integration and coeducation. The boy's education is Year 10 standard and has a heavy emphasis on manual trades. Gifted children after Year 10 generally go to the Tardun facility near Geraldton, run by the Christian Brothers, or to the parish of Rossmoyne in Perth run by the Pallotines, where a Pallotine priest looks after them as they attend state high schools.

Eventually they return to Broome and many go onto the Aboriginal reserves. Jobs are not too easy to come by even if the motivation is there and most drift into a life of government weekly unemployment cheques (the dole), lying under a tree or wandering around, and, unfortunately, imbibing too much alcohol.

The whites in Broome make a big thing of the Aboriginal alcohol problem. But without a doubt, more whites than Aborigines have a major alcohol problem. But it stands out with the Aboriginal since he drinks too fast and without care, just as he seems to live his whole life, and he

quickly loses control and wants a fight. The police clearly have a major problem but they don't seem to show much tolerance and concern, indeed they sometimes seem to go looking for trouble.

Of the two hotels in Broome, one, the Roebuck Bay, is the Aboriginal hotel – a dirty, wooden floored rat hole. Whites do drink there but fights are frequent. On a Saturday evening one of the recreations of Broome is to drive up on the other side of the street, park, and watch the action from both men and women Aborigines fighting in muddy water puddles. The other hotel, the Continental, is the white man's hotel and is as good as many in Perth. Again, blacks do drink there and are tolerated except in certain bars. But there is a better dress expected and any form of trouble is quickly jumped on by the waiting police.

The blacks I refer to here are the obviously Aboriginal people. The mixed race people are allowed anywhere and show a proper respect for alcohol and are probably the most civilized and refined people in the town.

The Christian Brothers school is a tremendous setup – built for the climate but rivalling many of our boarding schools – better in being newer. The students are almost exclusively black, the white children of all religions go to the government schools. We talked a lot to the Christian Brothers the last time we were in Broome. They have an air of defeatism or stagnation about them. They don't seem to know what they are educating the Aborigines for. To educate them into their own culture is impossible, their carefree, share with all, charge for nothing, attitude to life is marvelous to see, but they cannot exist even on the fringe of white society with this attitude. And to retreat back to the desert seems deplorable – so what should we do?

We slept on the Presbytery veranda, all packed up and ready to go. The starter motor on the Toyota packed up but Brother Gunter from Beagle Bay will have a look at it.

### **Sunday December 21<sup>st</sup>**

We took off in the Bishop's 6-seater Cessna from Broome Airport at about 5.00 a.m. and were in Beagle Bay by 5.25 a.m. Why not drive there? Well the roads were all impassable. John McGuire had come up the evening before, he came out and picked us up from the sand strip airport.

We had coffee with him and his nephew from Cobram in Victoria. Together they are fencing off the top of the peninsula which has King Sound on its east coast, the Indian Ocean on its west. 120 miles of fencing, 3 strands of barb wire. They have all the posts in and about 25 miles completed. John (senior) and Aboriginals work on one end and John (junior) and other Aboriginals work on the other end. They camp out for the week, Monday to Friday, and take their food with them. The intention is to create a real station and their neighbors to the south have to be fenced off so that stock losses become less, rustling is not unheard of in these parts, even John (senior) avoided eye contact for that exchange, quid pro quo?

The Beagle Bay mission is 80 miles north of Broome, in scrub country, on a promontory jutting out into the Indian Ocean. There are five German Pallotines - one old priest and four Brothers - all of whom are somewhat of a headache to John McGuire. Some nuns run the school and another Order the hospital, although the state government also sends a trained nurse to the hospital now. John McGuire doesn't seem to get on with the Germans or the nuns, he apparently runs the mission with a quite different idea to their set (paternalistic) ways.

We all went up to the common room after Mass and dinner (which the nurse prepared) and had a discussion, maybe argument, with the Germans, mainly about the direction of Catholic education. Their hospitality wasn't too great. John McGuire was most apologetic to us and angry with them. The bishop was nowhere to be seen, I guess he's heard all this before!

## Monday December 22<sup>nd</sup>

We left at 5.00 a.m., I sat in the front seat of the Cessna next to the Bishop. He gave me a map and it was easy to pick out our route from Beagle Bay to Balgo Hills. The trip over the huge Fitzroy River, past Derby and over a couple of low mountain ranges took about 2½ hours. Thunder storms and cascades of lightning barred our way, their combination like huge rectangular canvases alive with electricity, many several miles wide. We detoured around them, the plane seeming to know its own way since the Bishop closed his eyes as he prayed his rosary. I prayed too but I guess we had different intentions.

About 80 miles from Balgo Hills, despite a lot of water lying around, the desert became visible and dominant. We banked over the old mission 14 miles away from our landing strip and also over the new mission. Already we could see mobs of kids excitedly heading for the airstrip, just a cleared strip on the sandy plain. I suffered my normal small plane airsickness and I landed looking quite undignified as I headed for a scrub and some privacy.

Father Ray Hevern, the mission director, met us and drove us back to the mission. The Bishop and Chris Saunders looked around for about an hour and then returned to Broome. We were in time for morning smoko and an indoctrination on the weekday routine of the mission. Bells and sirens would alert us to the next activity.

Rising	5.00 a.m.
Mass	5.30 a.m.
Breakfast	6.30 a.m.
Work	7.00 to 9.00 a.m.
Smoko	9.30 to 9.50 a.m.
Work	9.50 to 11.30 a.m.
Lunch and Siesta	11.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m.
Work	1.30 to 3.30 p.m.
Smoko	3.30 to 3.50 p.m.
Work	3.50 to 5.30 p.m.
Tea	5.45 p.m.
Evening ritual after that!	

Over the next 24 hours we met all the remaining white personnel on the mission – some were on holidays. Here they are:

Father Ray Hevern, Pallotine, Mission Director (the Boss!)

Terry Murphy, Storekeeper, Second in command.

Father Anton Peel, Pallotine, Researcher into Aboriginal languages, no managerial role.

Lay missionaries: (all paid \$7 per day)

Peter Griffin, Office clerk, Boy's dormitory supervisor, early 20's

Kevin Douglas, painter, assistant storekeeper, early 20's

Bert Hoffmeyer, plumber, early 20's

Jim Larkin, truck driver, about 45 years old

Fully paid personnel:

John Whitlock, mechanic, wife and five kids, eldest 14

Peter Conway, station manager, wife and two kids, eldest 13

St John of God Sisters:

Sister de Porre, kitchen\laundry

Sister Felicitas, nurse

Visitors for the hoilidays:

Sister Kath Ahern

Teresa (postulant or nun-in-training)

Sister Angela

Brother Samuel, Marist from Sydney Province

Brothers Vincent, Dennis and Timothy, Marists from Melbourne Province

Absent:

Five state government teachers

Grader driver

Welder

One lay missionary

One Sister of St John of God

Total:

27 whites on the Mission if all present, including 7 children

The mission was shifted to this site in 1963. After 12 years there is an Aboriginal population of 700 including 200 children. The town design is based on a huge oval maybe 400 by 300 yards. Inside this oval is just a smaller grassed football oval, a basketball court with flood lights and a large shaded gazebo for onlookers. All the buildings are outside the oval but framing it, on a big circular street.

At one end of the oval is the Church with its bell and siren. To its left are the convent and staff dining buildings, the girls' dormitory, the laundry/sewing building, the school and kindergarten, the teachers' houses, essentially the female domain. To its right are the old and new monastery for the priests, the caravans for the male staff who choose that mode of living, the boy's dormitory, the admin center, essentially the male domain.

Beyond the male domain is the hospital, the children's dining room, the bakery, the store and then, some forty yards from the oval begins the large area where the 700 aboriginals live in concrete block houses made available to them, although most, if not all, prefer to live, cook, sleep and relax outside on the ground. On the other side of the oval beyond the female domain, there are the stables and garden, the mechanic's house, the brick factory, the power house, the garages, the workshops.

That, if you like, is the micro description, the macro is this. The five million acres station is shaped like a huge rectangle oriented north-south. The mission is at the northwestern extremity of the property, the station house is on the southeastern boundary about halfway down. The journey between the two is 87 miles. If in your mind's eye you quarter the huge rectangle, the top left quadrant where the mission complex is located is reserved for horses, there are about 400 of them. The two quadrants on the right side are cattle country, the station house centered on them. The fourth quadrant to the south of the mission complex is all sand dunes with a steep cliff separating



them from the horse country, the semi - desert. Balgo Hills is the biggest cattle station in Australia but is not recognized as such since it is a mission. It is owned by the State and Federal Governments in theory, but in practice, given the emerging land rights legislation, it “belongs” to the local Aboriginal tribe, not that they recognize boundaries of any kind. The Pallotines know they have a temporary “lease”.

On our first morning we pottered around, getting oriented, and unpacked until lunchtime and then I had a siesta. We have rooms in the old monastery, convenient to the church, the dining room and the convent we are to paint.

Christmas day was looming. After lunch, Dennis and I built a big crib down the back of the church from reinforcement cyclone wire, spinifex and a tarpaulin spread over various boxes and articles of junk. With the statues added it was quite pretty. Vin and Sam put up decorations on the basketball court – colored lights and flags.

After tea we threw a few baskets and watch the older teenage boys play a game. They are very fast and throw some incredible shots. Hundreds of kids and adults and all the white community collect around the lighted basketball court each evening and have a natter. The weather is very hot and dry but the desert cools off somewhat during the night.

### **Tuesday December 22<sup>nd</sup>**

Dennis in bed with the Balgo stomach upset – it is rather famous evidently and many visitors succumb in their early days here. I have just felt lightheaded so far. Finished decorating the church. We decorated the store also on Tuesday – made it very colorful. Actually spent all day in the store, rearranging stuff, putting out toys and clothes and the pensioners’ food. The pensioners get a certain amount of their pension in money, the rest in food. Many of them are not long out of the desert and have no concept of money.

### **Wednesday December 24<sup>th</sup>**

Finished the store in the morning. After lunch I spent about an hour with my four altar boys. There are no regular altar boys, no compulsion these days to attend Mass as there used to be. Consequently few blacks attend Mass – there has been no attempt to design a meaningful liturgy or music – this area needs a huge injection. The kids are all taught in the state school – the teaching nuns left a couple of years ago – but the priests have pretty free entry into the school and have two religion periods each week. I found the kids knew what the crib was all about but they had no real concept of church and no respect for it, no genuflecting for example.

I trained the four altar boys – Joseph, Xavier, Brian and Victor- for about an hour. They look pretty scrubby but we have nice clean altar servers' outfits. They muck around a bit and are very boyish – but they don't try to talk to me, I don't know what their command of the English language is, they use their own language all the time. They are a very tactile people – kids up to 14 wander up and hold your hand and cuddle.

Went back to the store which was bedlam. Over \$4,000 had gone into the camp as wages and a Christmas bonus and trading was brisk. Toys, food, drinks, ice-creams, clothes. Must have taken back about \$3,000. Many of the blacks have no concept of money. Kids mad on cap-guns. We whites set up a water pistol fight and squirted every kid who came in – consequently we sold dozens of water pistols!

Back to work. Decorated the dining room and monastery common room for Christmas. Our real job loomed – sorted out brushes and paint and sent a telegram to Perth for some rollers – looks a big job.

Found out at 5.00 p.m. that one of my altar boys – Victor – had gone off to Sturt Creek station for a corroboree. Quite a few of the blacks have left by car and truck. Everywhere we go now a whole mob of kids come with us.

Ray Hevern returned from Alice Springs (our nearest neighboring town) with a plane load of supplies, but only 600 kilograms of the 2,400 we should have had, Alice is isolated by floods, and out of most items.

We had “midnight Mass” at 8.00 p.m., a full church and most went to communion. Altar boys were superb, deadly serious and remembered quite a lot of what they had to do. The two priests concelebrated. People (3 families) from neighboring stations came also – talk about pioneers!

After Mass we all went down to the basketball court and had a party. Dozens of kids and lots of soft drink cans. The older blacks played cards, some gambling game I couldn’t figure out. The next morning one guy who doesn’t work and therefore didn’t get wages bought a \$130 radio-cassette player with his winnings from the night before.

At tea, a rude interruption. Fight in the camp. One guy, drunk with grog bought from a road house 120 miles away, laid out another guy with a nulla-nulla (club). Vin and I went down with Ray Hevern and Sister Felicitas. Much muttering, women shrieking and shouting. Guy lying there, blood pouring out of his head. Other guys wandering around with boomerangs, spears, knives, clubs, all scowling at one another.

We loaded the injured guy into the hospital wagon, crowds of kids following. They all know our names by now – Tim! Vin! Den! They all thought it a good show. The victim recovered but spent the night in hospital. They reckon the blacks have incredibly thick skulls, must have because they whack one another with huge clubs (nullas) when they fight and it’s a fight where

you hit and get hit, turn by turn. The kids fight a lot too – but the adults never lay a finger on the kids – hmm!

### **Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> - Christmas Day, 1995**

We had Mass at 8.00 a.m. and then we all worked in the store until 11.00 a.m. Quite a crowd. At 11.00 we had a party for the kids, only about 90 of the 200 showed up, many had gone to Sturt Creek for the corroboree. The kids got a pie and a drink, apples, balloons, cakes, etc. but no more ice cream since Alice Springs was out of that.

We whites had a big Christmas dinner at 12.30. Turkey, sparkling wine, etc. oh, Courage Draft beer. After lunch we headed out in the Community Health Service's Land Cruiser for the nun's swimming hole. This is on sacred ground to the Aboriginals, so private for the whites. It's about a mile away from another rock pool where the nuns used to take the kids before disappearing to their own spot. The pool is about six feet deep in parts but much shallower elsewhere. We dived off the bank and had fun.

Peter Larkin came out in the Holden one-ton without a spare and had a puncture. So the women went back in the Land Cruiser, picked up the kids Peter had brought out and dropped off at the other hole and headed for the mission and a spare.

We men read and slept and waited – the trip is 17 miles to and from but it takes about 50 minutes each way. We got back about 8.00 p.m. and had tea and went to bed. Most of the people were watching an Elvis movie in the “drive-in” theatre where they sit on the grass and watch 16 mm films.

The swimming pool is south of the mission in the semi- desert. They call the area the pound, it is separated from the mission and horse country by a U-shaped steep cliff, about 100 feet high. The pound starts about a mile south of the mission. From the mission the horizon seems quite flat

but then you come to this steep cliff (there is a break you can drive through). The maps of the area show hills (hence, Balgo Hills) but these are actually the cliffs of the pound. The pound is probably 20 miles wide where we swim and it goes south for 50 miles or so before it peters out and merges into the real desert. Every now and again, about 6.00 p.m., a car load will head out to the cliffs and watch the sunset – it is generally quite colorful over the red cliffs, our own Uluru.

### **Friday 26<sup>th</sup> - Boxing Day, 1995**

On Boxing Day the mission reverted to the holiday program for about a month. The Aborigines no longer worked at building houses, brick making, etc. The work program for the whites continues but we get up at 7.30 a.m. and eat at irregular times. We have tea about 5.30 p.m. and Mass is after tea. I couldn't have taken the 5.00 a.m. rising for too long.

But, work to be done. We painted all day but had a siesta after lunch. After tea, then Mass, we went and watched a movie called Sounder. The Aborigines sit in family groups on the grass – very picturesque. I don't know what they made of this:

*The Morgans, a family of poor black sharecroppers in the Depression-plagued South, struggle to find enough to eat despite the help of their hunting dog, Sounder. When father Nathan (Paul Winfield) resorts to stealing food, he is captured by police and sent to prison, and his wife, Rebecca (Cicely Tyson), is left to care for their son, David (Kevin Hooks). Though Sounder has run away, David never gives up hope that his dog will return, just as he believes that he will see his father again someday.*

### **Saturday December 27<sup>th</sup>**

On Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> I got up at 7.30 a.m. We painted all day until 5.00 p.m. with no siesta, we have finished the kitchen, had Mass after tea and afterwards the usual gathering of all the

people on the basketball court areas. The whites adjourned to the monastery common room for drinks and cards, a game called 500. I was buggered and in bed by 10.00 p.m.

### **Sunday, December 28<sup>h</sup>**

Sunday was a no-work day except that the store was opened in the morning for a couple of hours with us working there.

After 8.00 a.m. Mass followed by breakfast I slept and read all morning. In the afternoon seven of us went out to the old mission about 13 miles away – only ruins now. The walls are made of bricks formed from anthills. We went on to the nun's swimming pool for a swim and then back to the mission for tea. Saw the last half of the Elvis movie, had a couple of beers and went to bed.

### **Monday December 29<sup>th</sup>**

Monday we painted all day – no siesta. Had Mass at 6.30 p.m., I read for a while and went to bed. The weather is very hot (114° plus) but there is no humidity so you don't seem to sweat much.

### **Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup>**

Tuesday we painted all day but I had a siesta. Tea was before Mass and after Mass we lay out on the lawn - Ray Hevern, the four Marists and Simon – with a few cans and had a long talk about the stars (a perfectly clear sky most nights, no moon and every star you can think of trying to get your attention) and the limits of space and Einstein's theories and the Aborigine's beliefs.

Ray talked about the marriage problems, tribal laws about marrying people of the right skin – these laws seem to have a genetic foundation to prevent inbreeding. There are a few girls allowed to lock themselves up in the laundry\kitchen area each night. They don't want to marry the guy

(generally old and already married) their parents promised them to, or they want to marry a man of the wrong skin and their parents won't allow it.

There was a horrible beating given out this morning. While these girls were at breakfast in the dining room, the parents of one of them came in and grabbed her. All the camp had wind of it and she was dragged outside into their midst. The father properly beat her up with his fists and then the mother whaled into her with a stick. Finally, she was carted into the hospital. She was OK later in the day although another girl got hers too but we didn't see that. No one can interfere in these family matters but you can watch. The whites reckon the black fellas are really good actors and that half of the hitting is playacting. But there's too much blood shed for the other half to be playacting.

### **Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup>**

On Wednesday we painted all day. I got the job of delivering tomorrow's homily so I wrote down some thoughts during siesta time. Actually I've only taken siesta twice – I use the time generally to write this diary.

Ray Hevern came by and watched Vin paint for over an hour and talked about his problems. He would be very keen to have Brothers here. He wants a Catholic school with nuns and Brothers but also to have Brothers to be recreation officers – there are over 200 kids here below the age of 15 and after school and during holidays they have absolutely nothing to do. A library, language instruction for the adults, but particularly working with the kids in the areas of woodwork, metalwork, needlework, cooking – fulltime jobs for at least two people.

After tea we were inspired to get all the kids playing continuous cricket and we had great whooping and hollering for well over an hour. About 9.00 p.m. the whites gathered and we had a 20 minute paraliturgy prayer service in the church – a few kids came, there are always a few kids

around. Then we had a drink together until midnight when we sang Old Lange Syne. I went off to bed but some kicked on until 2.00 a.m.

### **Thursday January 1<sup>st</sup> - New Years Day**

Mass at 8.00 a.m. I gave the sermon I'd prepared about the Marist Brothers, what a religious order is, the preparation for Christ, Mary's free fiat, the importance of the mother of God. Seemed to be OK.

The store was opened after breakfast. One of the Aboriginals (deaf and dumb but you can communicate with him by sign language) made me a didgeridoo. I gave him \$5 for it. Another guy blew it for a while but didn't think much of it.

A plane came in at 9.30 a.m. It brought a Mercy sister, two ex-lay missionaries and a friend of one of them. Everybody went out to the strip to welcome them – a big social occasion. One of the ex-lay missionaries is a guy called Terry McCabe, who is an ex-student of our Marist school in Brunswick, a suburb of Melbourne. He's about 24.

We had a big meal – 21 of us – two priests, 5 Sisters, 4 Brothers, 1 postulant, 4 lay missionaries, 1 ex-lay missionary and friend, 1 medical student, 1 as yet unclassified female (canonical) and somebody else - for dinner on New Years Day.

I tried to have a sleep after but 10 of the men and one Sister were leaving for the station homestead about 3 p.m., so I went also, too good an opportunity to miss. The station homestead is 87 miles from the mission. We travelled with a few mattresses to smooth the bumps on the back of a Toyota one- ton Land Cruiser. The trip took about 2¼ hours so you can gauge the condition of the dirt track we travelled over. The station is on the eastern boundary of the mission property. That boundary is also the border between Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The station homestead has a manager, Peter Conway, who has a wife, Judy, and two kids, Kay (11)



ands Christopher (4). There are also a group of Aboriginal families who live in little houses, the men working as stockmen or jackaroos.

The station house is built of stone quarried from a pit about 8 miles away and is quite pretty. Most of the station houses up here are asbestos sheets on the outside, unkempt and dilapidated. The Conway home is shaped like a T, the top bar being 4 bedrooms in a row with a verandah breeze way all around. The stem of the T, again surrounded by a verandah breezeway, is the kitchen, dining, lounge, office and toilet block. There's a fence around the whole 2 acre property, lots of lawn and a dozen trees, obviously a home to be proud of, even a pool table on one verandah.

We arrived about 5.15 p.m., they had visitors, the next door neighbors with 5 kids, over for a New Years Day drink. They had come 67 miles across the Territory from Mongrel Downs station.

We all had a drink and sat and talked and had a bbq tea about 8.00 p.m. Ray Hevern had brought a film – Cromwell – with him. They have a 16 mm projector so we sat and watched that out on the lawn, the screen flapping madly in the breeze and thunderstorms all around us, although we only got a few drops. The Aboriginal stockmen and their families also came over – evidently they often come around to play pool.

After the film we (22 of us altogether) grabbed a mattress and a sheet or blanket. I slept out on the lawn under a shrub on the eastern side and saw the 4.00 a.m. sunrise but didn't get up until 8.00 a.m., the shrub provided enough shade. Some cornflakes and coffee and I was ready for the day.

### **Friday January 2<sup>nd</sup>**

We left about 9.00 a.m., twelve of us including Peter Conway, in two Toyota half trucks and went on a mill check around the cattle country south of the homestead. The windmills, sometimes supplemented by petrol engines, are about 10 miles apart. We followed a roughly

rectangular course over rough man-made roads – the mission has its own grader and it operates fulltime.

At each mill we stopped and had a talk and a drink from the mill if the water was good and some of it was very good! The mills are all named after saints or Our Lady or the Bishop or various ex-staff. Mobs of cattle were around and all looked in pretty good condition. The only fences are around the mills and at each the setup is much the same. The thirsty cattle are herded through a gate into a holding paddock and then are let into a second paddock that has the mill and troughs in it. Animals needing attention can easily be isolated by not being allowed into the mill paddock before the issue is resolved.

The cattle don't go too far away from the mills and despite the lack of fences any cattle not rounded up as above are found by following their tracks out from the mills until they stop and the jackaroos track them down.

The mill areas are covered in spinifex, each bush looks like a green porcupine with a few tufts of oats sticking out of its back. It has a very high protein value and although thorny and brittle when old, it is very succulent when young. The men burn it regularly and it regrows very rapidly. Peter Conway would like to harvest it and hand feed it but there is no food processing machine yet built that can handle two foot high green porcupines with oats growing out of their back.

There are other good spinifex areas around, they plan to put mills on them and open them up gradually. Much of the work on the station revolves around the critically important maintenance of the wind mills. There's artesian water to be found pretty much anywhere but you have to drill down to it and pump it to the surface.

Our trip around the mills was 60 miles. And this is only a corner of the station which totals 5¼ million acres or 8000 square miles. Another big area around the mission complex supports the

horses, about 400 of them. They are still used to herd the cattle since the terrain is too rough for Toyotas and trail bikes although they are still used as support. The Aborigines love both.

Halfway around the mills we detoured down to a gorge and a stream called Kirsh's Springs, named after the previous manager. We had a swim in a hole and went south a bit to see where the creek meanders along into a lake and then goes underground. This lake is the first in a series extending southwards. The Aborigines know all this, they don't need windmills to survive.

Got hit by a squall shortly afterwards and the rain was very cold – but out came the sun and nobody remembered the rain after 5 minutes, it was a very hot day. Whenever we check the thermometer at the mission, it reads 110° - 116°.

We got back to the station homestead about 2.00 p.m. and had a cold lunch and a beer. Said goodbye and headed for the mission. We could see more rain squalls all around us but we missed them all. Plenty of willy willies out here – they are like small tornadoes, they go whipping along stirring up plenty of dust and often threaten to bugger up all of our fresh paint – not our friends!

We left the “main” road, actually a track, after about 10 miles and headed north along a rougher track, plenty of four wheel drive needed, to a place called Lorna Springs. After about 15 hairy miles we reached a low rocky range. Stopped to look at a cave and some Aboriginal paintings, climbed a tunnel and emerged to a view up on top of the hill. I carry a pocket camera with me wherever I go and got a few snaps.

We travelled on over very rough country with the low red rocky hills on either side. Saw a bunch of kangaroos. About 3 miles in we stopped and walked a couple of hundred yards to the bottom of Lorna Springs. It consists of a long cascade of five rock pools linked together over a slope with 30 feet cliffs on either side as you climb up. We headed up to the top pool, about 20 feet in diameter and 20 feet deep. Dived in from various heights into the pool – it was exhilarating.

After about half an hour we all went down to the next pool. Same depth but much smaller in diameter and one of the guys was doing 20 foot dives into it off the sides – quite mad! Some jumped in. Sam put on quite an act, standing about 12 feet above the water on a ledge, yelling “Chicken Man” and wondering about the st(r)ain on his footy shorts. Eventually Angela went off down to the next pool and Sam shouted out various imprecations about Lot’s wife, (she who looked back and turned into a pillar of salt), stripped off his beloved shorts and dived in in his underpants. Naturally we all thought the shorts were the only covering so it was all rather an anti-climax.

Home we came about 45 miles, the first 15 on a track so rough and water-logged that we were driving in the scrub alongside it half the time. It used to be the main road from Halls Creek to Alice Springs but that was some time ago and road maintenance has long ago ceased. A lot of lightning and rain squalls around on the way back but they all missed us.

Back at 8.00 p.m., had a big tea – no deficit of meat here. They do all the killing out on the station, cart the carcasses in here and cut them up in the back of the store and load the bits into their deep freezer, 40°F below. The blacks buy the meat when they are too lazy to go after bush food – goannas, lizards, bush turkeys, kangaroos, etc.

A couple of the nuns had short-sheeted all our beds and put twigs in them. Sam flopped and woke at 2.00 a.m. with sticks poking into him, some scream! We were all absolutely buggered but it was a great two days, a real experience.

### **Saturday January 3rd**

On Saturday we were up at 8.00 a.m. and painting by 20 past. Needed a siesta but I wrote the diary – hard to keep up, so much happening. Painted until 5.15 and had tea. After tea I went for my usual ride on Ray Hevern’s Yamaha bike. Am gradually getting the hang of it. Went for a ride out along the station road and saw a bunch of horses galloping down the road towards me, a

big black wild-looking stallion in the lead and he didn't look like slowing down. I stalled the bike and had to wheel it around towards the mission by hand. The horse was still coming, I stalled the bike again. Finally away, my front wheel in the air, I went like blazes – bloody horse!

We had Mass after tea. A few adults and a lot of kids come. About a dozen teenage girls stay in the girl's dormitory instead of living in the blacks' camp. They say they are scared of the men but we all suspect they just want a bit of comfort, a mattress rather than the hard earth. They are dragooned into going to Mass. Two boys also go from the boys' dorm. One was burnt badly when someone threw petrol on a camp fire and his parents disowned him. Basically the Aborigines' creed is, if you can't keep up then lay down and die. The other boy is an orphan I think. Sister Felicitas drives down to the camp and rounds up a van full of kids just before Mass, so there's always plenty of noise in the church.

After Mass we talked for a while on the lawn and then went down to the basketball court and threw a few baskets with half a dozen older teenagers until about half past nine. A white Holden sedan was cruising around and there was a bit of shouting and activity around the girls' dorm. The word was out that the guys in it had stolen it from a white man on Papunya station up the road. They were not from our camp. They were driving around doing wheelies and generally big-manning it. Ray Hevern chased them around the circle of the mission in his Toyota truck but they had too many herbs. Then he took to his motor bike and they eventually boiled their engine. So he went back to the Toyota and chased them again and their engine promptly boiled again and seized. They fled on foot so Ray unscrewed their rotor button and is going to contact the police today. Last night he took the rotor buttons off all the mission vehicles so they wouldn't knock off one of them. Never a dull moment!

One of our mysteries was solved at the basketball courts. The dormitory girls are much given to shouting out Godigi words and we repeat them and they laugh. I came out of the dining room the other day and shouted “On guard!” to an 8 or 9 year old and made to fence with her. The other girls nearly died laughing. It turned out that all the kids have bush names as well as their baptismal names. One of the girls is called Cocky because she never stops talking and the bush name for that is “Congara”, which they all thought I had shouted. So I shouted it few more times – the girl blushed (?) and then the other bush words were thrown into the ring. The most common word was “Hokkinger” and repetition of “Congara Hokkinger” by us seemed just too hilarious, they rolled around. After a couple of days of this we were all starting to suspect something, so when I saw a half-caste girl, Patty, talking to one of the nuns, I went over and asked her what Hokkinger meant. And it means “I am after you.” So now the mystery of “Congara-Hokkinger” was explained, “Cocky I am after you”. After I went off to tell Vin and Dennis, Patty added to the nun something like; “She’s not much of a choice!” Terry Murphy explained to us that the girls talk about little else than this theme – their anticipated or real relations with men. They don’t seem too much different to white girls of that age!

Father Ray Hevern was growing more and more comfortable with us, certainly helped by the fact that both Vin and I were heads of secondary schools. He gave us a run-down on the other missions in the area. About 100 miles south of Broome is LaGrange, another Pallotine mission. They make a lot of money growing vegetables and selling them in Broome. On the peninsula 80 miles north of Broome is Beagle Bay which we visited. It’s a very old mission, the people after five generations of contact with missionaries are somewhat Christianized.

It’s a run-down cattle station now. John McGuire is trying to revive it but most experts reckon he’s wasting his time, the blacks won’t work, they don’t hunt or fish beyond walking the

flats at low tide to pick any stranded fish. The mission is too close to Broome and the Aborigines know their rights about unemployment benefits and so on and they are consequently not compelled to do anything. (Later an Aboriginal leader in Perth told me they sadly refer to the dole as the paper kangaroo, no more need to hunt for traditional food).

It is interesting to reflect upon how our culture breeds ambition in children, constant pressure of parents on kids to be something in life, to be better than us. The Aboriginal culture is the exact reverse. The parents don't talk to their kids at all, life is a slow walk, a search for food and water, take the easy road to get the necessities and then relax, sleep, play cards if you have money, borrow it if you don't. their attitude to sharing and caring is way past Christianity. There is no question that what I have is yours. Their language doesn't include the words Please and Thank you.

Fifty miles further northeast of Beagle Bay is Lombardina Mission. It has no station, no cattle, is very run-down and the people are living on Government handouts, the dole and healthcare. There are two Protestant missions, one run by the United Aboriginal Mission is Baptist. It seems to operate OK from Halls Creek. At Fitzroy Crossing an Anglican Mission operated for a while but has closed down. The blacks there live in a camp on the edge of town, the streets (as we saw last year) are lined with empty beer cans, the people stagger around, alcoholism is a huge problem. The annual monsoon floods flush out the debris from the town and keep it livable, but it's very sad!

At Derby, the elders want to shift the tribe to a cattle station they own through success with land rights legislation but the young people won't leave the alcohol and action of the town.

The other Catholic mission is Kalumburu, it's run by the Benedictine Order. It is very far north, no roads to it, situated at the mouth of the Cane River. A virtual tropical paradise, all sorts of fruit, a big cattle station and a real old style mission in the way the people are treated.

In contrast this place, Balgo Hills, has changed greatly over the years. I guess the mission started as a place where the Aborigines could get free food and medical services, so they stopped their continual nomadic way of life and accepted Christianity in exchange for food and care.

For years, John McGuire, the previous boss, refused to baptize anyone, but the higher ups demanded it and now many of the people here are nominally Catholic, some more so. At the beginning the kids were all put into dormitories and fed three meals a day in a dining room and kept away completely from their parents except if the parents came out of the camp up to the basketball court to talk with them at night after tea. All the kids were compelled to attend church and religious instruction and as much pressure as possible was placed on the adults to become Christians.

Of course, this was not just the Catholic Church's attitude to the indigenous people. All over the state Aboriginal kids were forcibly removed from their parents by government agencies and essentially incarcerated in fenced in compounds euphemistically called "missions" with total separation from their parents and tribes. In a way the Catholic methods were far kinder.

When Ray Hevern came here five years ago he gradually changed the paternalistic approach. The staff objected but eventually most shipped out. A lay bloke – about 40 years old – called Terry Murphy turned up one day and Ray made him his deputy and he runs the store and is great. The kids were all sent back to the camp, the dormitories only for orphans, station kids during school term and girls with various problems.



Religious compulsion is out, although bi-weekly religious instruction is given to the kids and efforts are made to encourage them to go to Mass. But attendance at Mass is very low, the exception being the full church at Mass on Christmas Eve. It is accepted now that it will take generations to Christianize the people and have them accept Christian religion freely. In the meantime the white staff lead a fairly full religious life, Mass, prayers, monthly recollection days, in-service training of lay missionaries in Broome every few months.

The Sisters who taught in the school have left – dwindling numbers in their Order – and the school is now operated by the State Education Department which sends up five teachers for a minimum two year stint. But this year the whole five will be new – could be fun since the kids are naturally mischievous and little stirrers.

The Government is funding a housing association with a committee including a majority of Aborigines. The houses are already being built in the area beyond the church, nine houses under construction and three fully finished. Selected good families from the camp are offered the houses – all free. The Aborigines provide the bulk of the labour – making bricks and assisting construction. Each house is currently costing \$60,000 due of course to cartage costs but mainly labour since progress is extremely slow.

The financing of the mission is very interesting. Because of the beef industry collapse the mission makes no money from beef, or for that matter from its extensive vegetable garden, although it provides all of its own needs in these areas.

For the Aborigines, the workers only are paid, about \$30 a week. When Ray Hevern came here they were being paid \$1 a week and a plug of tobacco.

This money comes from the pensioners' government cheques. There are about 60 pensioners and they get about \$14 a week plus a flourbag of food. The rest of the pension money

pays all the workers. There is no compulsion to work but only the workers are paid. But because of the card games and the “I got – you can have” family rule, those who don’t work have got whatever they want.

Current inflation means that the pensioners’ money is not enough. Next year Ray Hevern is going to start putting all the workers on unemployment benefits. This money will be used to pay them and to run the mission. The Aborigines who don’t work will continue to receive nothing. All of this is done with Government approval. The Aborigines don’t understand that they could all apply for unemployment benefits so nobody tells them. There is not enough work for all the adults anyway. The general idea, of course, is to encourage the adults to work and support themselves – but it’s a long process.

The Aborigines who live in the camps on the edge of the Kimberley towns do get unemployment benefits of course and that provides the alcohol which is their downfall. Some of them must of course come here, there is a constant movement of people to and fro. But the spirit of this place is so strong that its method of operation remains unquestioned.

So where is the mission headed? asks Ray. Eventually it will be a town with a parish priest and support religious, but that is a long way off (actually he was wrong about that!). The image of a Church which is the ruling power is quite interesting. What this means to the people I don’t know. Of course the Roman Catholic Church has a long history of being the ruling power over many countries, indeed an empire. Does anyone ever heed the lessons of history?

Some lay missionaries have come here and “gone native.” Barefoot, unshaven, long haired, dirty, in rags. The Blacks lose respect for them very quickly. They accept the fact of who and what we are and how we choose to live. Clearly we whites eat and dress better than they do but they have the opportunity to be better in the new houses. But they don’t use the stove, still preferring

to cook and eat outside on the ground. The fridge, tables and chairs are unused – they only use the beds and the roof to shelter from the rain.

I think eventually they will be absorbed into our culture. Their own tribal culture here is still very strong and both they and the whites carefully preserve it. Father Anton is recording their language to turn it into written form and preserve it just as the Irish, the Welsh and many European regions have preserved their language against the onslaughts of the language and culture of the dominant race. Full culture, of course, cannot be preserved unless there is its own language and that will be the problem with the Aboriginal tribes since they are family-based and therefore few in numbers, maybe too few to have enough guardians of their way of life.

The hope is that they can live in two worlds, White and Black. The part Aborigines can survive, a bit of both is in them. But civilization must mean that they all become eventually like us, just as it has meant to every heathen, barbarian tribe that found itself on the fringes of the dominant wave of civilization, be it a white, black or other colored civilization. I don't think this is a bad thing, it's just inevitable.

The question of Christianity is not so simple. The injunction "Go teach all nations" is quite strong language and it needs a strong faith to believe that Jesus Christ can mean anything to these people. We three have already voiced our doubts several times in our evening meetings. Are any of these people Catholics really? Does our religion (they have their own) mean anything to them?

Last year the first full-blood Aborigine, Paddy Dalton – was ordained a Catholic priest. At the time I thought it was an epic event – having lived here for a while, I now think it is bloody miraculous. No wonder people, black and white, came a thousand miles and more to attend the ordination.

### **Sunday January 3<sup>rd</sup>**

We had a quiet Sunday morning. We had Mass at 8.00 a.m. followed by breakfast. Then I wrote the diary for most of the day and listened to the cricket on the radio. In the afternoon I read a couple of books. At 4.00 p.m. sixteen of us left in two vehicles and went out to Tom Cook's new station, Larrigwanna. Tom is about 55 and he has his wife, Margaret, with him, as well as two of his married sons and their wives and several young children.

They come from Rockingham in Queensland. Tom had a property there but he also has six sons. The youngest has just finished high school at Marist College, Ashgrove in Brisbane. The family property is too small for all of them, and they are keen on the land, so they have taken out a long term lease on one million acres of land on the northern boundary of Balgo Hills. Their camp is about 45 miles from the mission.

They came over from Queensland about 10 weeks ago, bought a semi full of kids and belongings and went back for another load of fencing materials. They have an area about 10 miles by 20 miles and a central spot earmarked for a homestead, but they only managed to get half a mile off the made road before they bogged down in the red sand, so that's where they have pitched camp. They cart water from Balgo for drinking although they have now drilled for water but it is a bit salty. They have just found good drinking water in another bore. They haven't any stock on the property yet but they have done 20 miles of fencing. Of course, they can't stock up until they put in windmills and troughs.

Their living arrangements are a strange mix of old and new. Each of the three families has built a humpy for itself, consisting of a caravan and a galvanized iron hut with a covered breezeway space between. Altogether there are five kids and two babies. They found a deserted dingo pup

and keep it tied up and it plays happily with the kids at this stage. They also have started a garden and planted a few shrubs.

They have a petrol fueled generator and so have electricity, a gas fueled refrigerator, a tank with a shower and toilet rigged beneath it – but all around is the desert and scrub and red dust and it must be a very hard life for the women.

But their spirits are very high – they are a happy family group and work well together. The men relish the challenge of starting a new station. They say they found the strict program of the established Queensland station very boring and lacking any sort of challenge and they do seem really keen for the job ahead.

Their neighbors from the next station north, the Savage family, were also here. They are all Catholic families. We had Mass under the tarpaulin awning and sang away and baptized the latest arrival and the sun set and cameras clicked often. After Mass we had time for a bit of a muck-around cricket game and the kids had fun.

Then we had a bbq tea with home made wines and beer and a bottle of champagne and a cake to welcome the new addition. Altogether there must have been 30 of us and it was a strange feeling way out there in the middle of the desert having a party with the food under a canvas roof and people wandering in and out of the dark.

We left about 9.15 and bounced home on the back of the Toyota. Got back about 10.30 and I was well and truly asleep by 10.35, staggered out at 8.30 a.m. on Monday morning.

### **Monday January 5<sup>th</sup>**

We have resumed painting but all of us are a bit wrecked. It is an overcast day and humid but there is a cool breeze blowing and so we have six of one and half a dozen of the other. We have so far

painted the convent kitchen, chapel, dining room and have nearly finished the five bedrooms and just got started on the bathroom area. Then we will do the outside of the convent.

Played the big kids basketball after Mass. These are the 15-20 year olds. Whites played blacks, that is Cardeyes versus Maroos. Our second game against them since we have been here and again we won fairly easily. Again they sank some incredible shots but they still have little or no defence. We just kept sending long balls down the court and sinking easy shots – but they like the game. One wonders how a competitive nature is developed.

### **Tuesday January 6<sup>th</sup>**

Again painted all day. A lousy day for most of us. I painted a bathroom with green glass paint and it looked bloody awful – all splotched and streaked besides the color being gangrene anyway. I had a few beers with the nuns before tea and cheered up. Although Vin promptly went off to bed and was vomiting several times through the night, another victim of the dreaded Balgo stomach bug.

Quite an eventful day ahead actually. Ray Hevern took Angela and eight of the kitchen\laundry girls off to Broome (632 miles) for a holiday in his Toyota. They left at 5.00 a.m. with a big send off. Rocks were chucked on our roofs by the lay missionaries as they returned to bed, critical of our non-appearance– I certainly wasn't going to get up at that ungodly hour.

Our famous stolen Holden (referred to earlier) plus six of the eight Papunya Station guys who came in it left Balgo about an hour later – where they had been living we had no idea but they had got the car started again. When they reached Billiluna Station about 80 miles north, they proceeded to do wheelies, smacked into a Suzuki, broke a few windows. The owner, Jim Wilson, and the manager, Les Verdun, both came out shooting. Shot one guy in the back and he dropped. At some stage one of Verdun's young sons was hit on the back by a thrown tyre lever. The driver

of the car was hit by a shotgun blast. They soon fled anyway and arrived back at our Balgo hospital at lunchtime. Billiluna warned us on the radio that they were coming and also contacted the police at Halls Creek, 180 miles north and the Flying Doctor who came quickly and flew the guy shot in the back out to the Derby hospital.

The stolen car was quickly surrounded at the hospital by all of our mob who didn't want the Papunya trouble makers around anyway. Ray Hevern was far away and oblivious to this but Terry Murphy, his deputy, stepped in and spoke to the perps. The shotgun victim was bandaged up by the medico – just a few pellets in him. Terry Murphy advised the rest of them to go sit in the shed and wait until the cops came so that they could explain their side of the story, that they were unarmed and had been fired upon. So they trooped off to the shed and squatted.

The cops arrived by plane at Billiluna and heard and saw and promptly flew back to Halls Creek for more ammunition. There was a story around that the bad guys had a Hornet rifle but there was no evidence of that and a search of the Holden failed to find any trace of it, better be safe than sorry I guess.

About 12.30 a.m. a plane circled the mission, a Holden sped out to the strip and back came two cops and a pilot. The kids were now all very quiet. The sergeant spoke to Terry, used the radio to call Halls Creek and Billiluna and interrogated the captives.

Then all our mob gathered around and the cop told them what the bad guys had done and that he was taking them away and he duly received muttered approval.

The pilot would only take one prisoner at a time in the plane and since the other cop had rounded up the other two Papunya perps there were seven of the eight to be flown to jail, the eighth being in the Derby hospital by now.

So Father Anton Pele became the black maria driver of his own Toyota truck. The handcuffed Papunya decidedly un-magnificent seven were led out through the ranks of chirping kids and driven off back north to Billiluna where another truck met them and Father Pele returned to Balgo Hills in time for tea.

He duly reported that the white guys at Billiluna were very quiet and extremely worried. The sergeant was bloody ropeable because this could be the start of a whole series of incidents. Finally, in came our hospital sister to report that the cops had left all their ammunition in our hospital! It was hard for us to keep a straight face!

At some stage during the afternoon we fare-welled Sister dePorre (Nancy) as she was off to the homestead for a few days' holiday. Too much excitement here!! I got a few good photos however.

We had tea at 6.30. Father Pele said Mass in 17 minutes (he's not the talkative type) and we Marists went to the basketball court and played continuous cricket with the kids. They get madly excited once they get the continuity idea and cries of Walla! Walla! (quickly!) keep the game going. Some of the kids have exceptional talent – they all have very good throwing arms since they are all keen hunters of birds and kangaroos and lizards – boomerangs and nulla nullas their weapons of choice. They are quick to retaliate to parental and older siblings admonitions with rocks and sticks – one of the 10 year old girls and an 8 year old boy have very good eyes and give the ball an almighty thump as a crescendo of walla, wallas urge on them and the fielders. The kids love this game. Many of our siestas are now interrupted by shouts of “Binent, Bat, Ball” as they want to get back to the game, never mind the heat or sleepy Vin.



We could hear ducks quacking over head and the kids counted them. Then down came the rain. We had 4 inches and it pelted down. It was beautiful. I slept that night with a sheet on and about 4.00 a.m. I leaned over the side of the bed and found a blanket.

### **Wednesday January 7<sup>th</sup>**

Cool and cloudy. The West Indies have collapsed for 128 and we paint on. We only have another 8 days since we fly out to Broome on Thursday week. Ray Hevern has hired two planes to bring back the laundry\kitchen girls and fly out three Marist Brothers, one fourth year med student and 1 lay missionary. Sam is flying out next Monday. It is all coming to an end quite quickly but we will have been here for nearly four weeks.

### **Thursday January 8<sup>th</sup>**

We painted all day. The rollers came on the plane and since we had finished the undercoat we rolled on the final green coat in three hours. The rollers make a tremendous difference but in the outback we have learned to make do with what we have – there isn't a hardware store for 400 miles or more.

Had a couple of beers and a chat after Mass and went to bed. Again it poured rain, about ½ an inch. Ray Hevern arrived back from Broome at 9.00 p.m., his Toyota covered in red mud. He reported that the story at Billiluna doesn't look too good for the owner and his manager. They were firing at unarmed Aborigines and will almost certainly be charged. Both of them, according to Ray Hevern, are very worried.

### **Friday January 9<sup>th</sup>**

Cool, cloudy and humid with a bit of rain. We painted on, doing green doors and white doors and window frames. Terry Murphy, Kath Ahern, Teresa and Patsy drove up to Halls Creek

to pick up Sister Immaculata off the plane. They left before 8.00 a.m., a little too early for me unfortunately, I am keen to see as much as possible of this fascinating country.

The white guy from Papunya who owns the stolen Holden came in with a truckload of Aborigines. He wasn't too impressed with the bullet holes and shotgun blasts on the car doors but he is taking the car back to Papunya tomorrow and some of the Papunya guys with him, some will stay over.

Ray Hevern had a meeting with the tribal elders. They decided to ban all young blokes from other areas from the mission – a pretty useless decision according to Ray since they are so mobile, and in any case, how do you actually get rid of them. I thought about my meeting with the big black stallion, but kept my mouth shut.

Movies after Mass – Godspell. We were all nicely settled when down came the rain. Chaos reigned. Then the decision to have the movies in the dining hall. Quick sprints through the storm. We Marists decided against a crowded hall of Aborigines and went and had some sparkling wine with Felicitas and Pat, no beer around.

Went to bed about 11.00 p.m. but couldn't sleep since a wild argument about land rights was raging in the common room between the lay missionaries and Simon, the 4<sup>th</sup> year med student. About 1.00 a.m., Dennis shouted out something and off they went but it had been a funny argument – just too bloody loud!

### **Saturday January 10<sup>th</sup>**

I couldn't sleep for a long time after they left so I slept in until about 10.00 a.m. Painted some more window frames before lunch. The returning travelers reported that Wilson, the Billiluna owner, has been charged with assault by a deadly weapon and that the shot Aborigine was in Perth and would either die or be a paraplegic.

Nobody is showing much sympathy to the Billiluna pair, evidently they are quite unrepentant, but also quite worried, not so much by the charges, but that another lot of Papunya guys will show up and extract revenge.

Ray Hevern told us their side of the story. They claim that Wilson, Verdun and Verdun's two kids were out in their Suzuki when a car load of Papunya guys drove up. They knew it was a stolen car and ordered these guys to stop. When they didn't Verdun tried to shoot out their tyres with his .22, he certainly hit the car a few times. Silly bloody thing to do, he could have killed someone. They said the stolen car shot off down the road with them in pursuit but at the creek crossing the Papunya guys jumped out of the car, opened the boot and took hunks of metal, tyre levers, etc., and started hurling these at the Suzuki.

Verdun reversed and took off back to the homestead with the Holden now in pursuit. Then the Papunya guys headed off to Billiluna Aborigines' camp looking for a gun that the Billiluna Aborigines would give them. When they couldn't get one, they stirred the place up, doing wheelies and throwing stuff and all the Billiluna families fled to the safety of the homestead, the stolen Holden in pursuit.

At the homestead, a very open place, certainly no fortress, the Wilson and Verdun families and a stockman defended themselves as well as they could. Wilson grabbed his rifle and took up position on the other side of the house to Verdun. The Papunya guys arrived, did wheelies to throw up the dust, rammed the Suzuki, threw rocks and other stuff through the homestead windows and generally created havoc.

Then Wilson shot one of them – in the back. He dropped and the rest fled. A shotgun was fired at them by one of the defenders and the driver copped a few pellets that were later removed

in our hospital. The stolen car headed straight back to Balgo and came to the hospital. Verdun got on the radio to us and to the police in Halls Creek and the hunt was on!

But the carload of Papunya guys who arrived here certainly weren't looking for trouble, they were really scared and Terry Murphy had no trouble convincing them to go sit in the shed until the police arrived.

All in all, a bloody stupid affair and it looks as though Wilson and Verdun have got a fair amount of explaining to do. Firing at unarmed Aborigines up here is just asking for a full scale war – the Aboriginal family and tribal bonds are very strong.

Sister Immaculata brought a cutting from the Perth newspaper giving an account of the incident – we don't get any newspapers here. It was interesting how the mission staff regarded the whole affair. The unpaid staff were wholly on the side of the Aborigines but the paid staff reckoned the white guys should have shot higher and earlier and more accurately. It wouldn't take much for them to get involved in a similar incident and that would be interesting on a mission!

### **Sunday, January 11<sup>th</sup>**

On Sunday we had Mass at 8.00 a.m. About 10.00 most of us went out to the dam to decide a bet. There is an old tin canoe out there in which Felicitas and de Porre had attempted to say their Office (Matins) in and it had tipped over soaking them and their prayer books. This story met with derision, so Felicitas bet me \$2 I couldn't paddle the canoe out into the middle of the dam. I accepted, did the deed and took the \$2, didn't have the slightest inclination to say "You keep it." After all the nuns were often wont to play tricks on us – like short-sheeting our beds – and we never ever reciprocated! (Bless me Father for I have sinned!) After lunch most went to a different swimming hole, I stayed on the bed and read. After tea we had movies – Godspell again. The people loved it.

### **Monday, January 12<sup>th</sup>**

Sam and Kath Ahern flew out at 10.30 a.m. to Alice Springs - also Kevin for a holiday. We all went out to the strip to see them off. Then returned and kept painting. The kids now play continuous cricket for hours during the day as well as after tea. They just have nothing to do and play away happily with few fights. One lanky 14 year old commandeered the bat for a while but as I walked across the yard a distant cry of "Tim – Bruce no share" caused him to drop the bat and shoot through. Originally the kids were quite happy to be Out! even when they only remotely looked out, but gradually we have taught them how to cheat, and we did it inadvertently by helping the little kids to stay in for a bit longer – the others soon picked up the techniques.

We painted until 5.30 p.m., had a beer, tea, Mass, cricket! Then a wondrous event, the Aborigines gave us a fare well corroboree, in full regalia with the didgeridoos wailing away.

### **Tuesday, January 13<sup>th</sup>**

Painted all day. Window frames, gutter boards and base boards in dark green. Didn't finish the whole job by 5.30 p.m. despite no siesta.

Last night of cricket we thought, but no. All of the kids were gone, all of the adults were gone. Gone that afternoon on a walkabout with no warning, something that happens every few months. They are nomadic by nature and I think, always will be. But we had said our goodbyes – we can only surmise the adults were grateful for what we did with the kids – but, again, there is no Thank You in their language.

### **Wednesday, January 14<sup>th</sup>**

Painted for two hours to finish the job, then it absolutely pelted down rain. But the planes came in at 12.00 noon. We quickly finished packing and Vin, Bert (off on holidays), a black from Fitzroy Crossing and I left in the 6-seater plane, the whole staff fare-welling us. Dennis and

Felicitas came an hour later in the 4-seater. We flew to Fitzroy Crossing, again through all the rain squalls – went around them rather than over or through, quite bumpy at times. Just about all the ground beneath us was covered in water. We landed in a strong cross wind, our wings at 45 degrees to the ground until the last seconds. Talented pilot, terrified passenger. We dropped off the black guy and flew on to Derby where Angela and Ann picked us up in their truck and gave us a cup of coffee. When Dennis arrived we drove the 140 miles to Broome in the Broome convent car that Angela and the returning laundry\kitchen holidaying girls had come up in earlier. They got the plane, we the car.

Pouring rain in Broome, same as when we left it a month ago. Had a few beers in the Continental Hotel – our first draught beers in a long time. Drove to the Presbytery where Mike McMahon cooked us tea and gave us a bed. Our Toyota was all fueled up, Brother Gunter had indeed come by and fixed the starter motor. We were ready to go.

#### **Thursday, January 15<sup>th</sup>**

Up at 5.00 a.m. and away by 6.16 a.m.. the first 30 miles were on bitumen but then the muddy gravel road started and continued for about 140 miles. We were at Sandfire Road House by about 12.30 so we didn't do too badly.

We had lunch on the 90 mile beach – it is only 7 kilometers off the road past Sandfire. We set up our card table and chairs on the sand and apart from the seagulls there was nothing as far as you could see along the beautiful beach, no wonder tourism won the day.

Not much water in the rivers around Port Hedland – we were there by 6.00 p.m., fueled up car and body and went looking for comfort, a caravan park with an onsite caravan for hire, but no way, none available anywhere. Much evidence of the recent cyclone, some unroofed houses but not too much damage.

Travelled down south about 20 miles and drove down a side road and camped. Rain was spitting, we hoped it wouldn't pelt. I slept with my top half under the table but about 11.00 p.m. it poured. Who cares! We had done 436 miles in 14 hours, say 11 hours driving.

### **Friday, January 16<sup>th</sup>**

We had camped right alongside the swollen Turner River. Plenty of mosquitoes. We were away by 6.50 a.m. Had lunch under the Cane River bridge, very picturesque. We saw why the highway was out of action for some days following the cyclone. The bridge is way up above the water – no flood would get that high too often, but all the built up approaches on both sides (particularly the south side) had been washed completely away and were cut by quite wide and deep trenches. We travelled on a sandy side road hastily piled up by dozers, the river bed just a little muddy.

We side-tracked to Coral Bay on the Exmouth road – a pretty little bay with a pub and a caravan park. Had a couple of beers, then four-wheel drove up the beach to a little glen in the sand dunes, camped, cooked and swam. 466 miles for the day.

I slept up on top of a sand dune with the ocean one side and the rolling plains on the other, full moon all night, wind blowing strongly. Vin and Dennis had a swim in the morning, but not me!

### **Saturday, January 17<sup>th</sup>**

We left at 9.20 a.m., had lunch in Carnarvon with Peter Lalor and Marie (nee Ryan), Vin's cousin, and camped at the Murchison River. The road house we camped at had a notice saying all roads in the Kimberleys (beyond Port Hedland) had been closed at 7.10 a.m. that morning because of Cyclone Vanessa – so we timed our movements pretty well, once again.

### **Sunday, January 18<sup>th</sup>**

Left the Murchison at 8.00 a.m., went to Mass in Dongara, just south of Geraldton, and were back in Perth by 4.30 p.m., giving us time to clean the vehicle and have a few celebratory beers before the phone started to ring.



## Epilogue

Tourism has dramatically changed the Kimberley. The sealed roads and the proliferation of services for tourists now lure over 250,000 people every year to the last frontier. The largest town is still Broome but now with 14,000 residents and a bigger mix of nationalities, next Derby with 3,300 in town and 5,200 (90% black) in the region, Fitzroy Crossing with 1,299 in town (70% black) and another 2,000 in 50 Aboriginal communities, similarly Halls Creek with 1,500 in town and 2,000 in communities, the relatively new Kununurra with 4,600 in its region (23% Aboriginal) and Wyndham with a shrinking town population but 7,500 in the region, almost all black. Maybe 50,000 residents now compared with much less than that number when we were there.

Land rights legislation has dramatically changed Balgo Hills. In 1976 we left a mission of over 700 people run by a Catholic priest who did indeed consult with the tribal elders but he was the boss. Just a few years later the mission became a town called simply Balgo. It is managed by the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Council and falls within the Tjurabalan People native title claim area. It has a petrol station, supermarket, Catholic parish, Luumpa Catholic school, Kutjunga Trade Training Center, health clinic and police station. It will shortly be connected by an all weather bitumen road to Halls Creek.

The Aborigines are still full-bloods, the desert is still the town's southern neighbor, the tribes still go walkabout. A Balgo woman and scientists from the University of Queensland are working together to develop a dictionary of the Kukatja language and a teacher's guide before English is taken up more widely by the younger generation and the tribal language (and culture) are eroded away. "Bincent, bat, ball" and "Tim - Bruce no share" and "Congara Hokkinger" are just memories, more so for us I'm thinking, but wonderful memories they are. I dream of the people and the People, the land and the Land, the whites and the Blacks.