KIMBERLEY

I have only once kept a diary in my life and that was during my time in Kimberley, and the extraordinary thing is that over the 50 years that have passed since that time it has remained in my possession. Keeping the diary on this one occasion was probably something to do with the stories Hedley had told me from Archibald Watson's diaries only months before I went north. Sadly my diary makes very dull reading compared to those tales, but when I read it recently it did make my Kimberley days come alive for me again. The diary also played a part in my life many years later when I became interested in the Bradshaw paintings of Kimberley.

My entries capture my reaction to meeting Aborigines for the first time and working with black people. It was not until WWII when the American army was billeted in England that most Britishers came in contact with black people. My first mass contact with a coloured race had been with the Zulu stevedores in Cape Town, when the ship had docked to load cargo on my voyage from England to Australia. The diary shows how my feelings about the Aborigines changed from fear to a paternal friendship.

I read that I arrived in Perth on April 6th 1955 and stayed at the old Esplanade Hotel. What a superb old-fashioned Victorian hotel it was in those days! I am sure it has long since been pulled down; if so, what a shame! I was only in Perth long enough to meet the owner of Liveringa Station, Mr Forest, who I hoped would employ me. The interview must have gone well enough as he agreed to give me a job for a few months. I flew north the following day and arrived in Derby to be met by Robert Rowell, the town's shipping agent.

Robert was very kind to me and let me sleep the night on his veranda as there was no way of getting out to the station until the following day. Liveringa was the first of two stations I was to work on during my time in Kimberley. It was a giant sheep station on the north bank of the Fitzroy River, about halfway from Derby to Fitzroy Crossing. Uncle Syd's cattle station was located on the south bank further up stream and opposite Fitzroy Crossing.

When I arrived at Liveringa I was met by the manager, Mr Kim Rose. That night he asked the four jackeroos working on the station to dinner. He was a perfectionist and we all had to wear white shirts, shorts and long white socks so we looked like officers in the Royal Navy. The homestead was of a simple open design situated on top of a steep rocky outcrop where it could capture every bit of breeze during the sweltering monsoon. From the veranda that ran around the house there was a wonderful view out over the flood plains of the Fitzroy River and I remember the sunset that evening was very spectacular. However, this luxury was not to last as the next day I was driven to an out-station called Paradise to work for Robin Campbell.

My diary tells me that Liveringa and Paradise were comprised of 700,000 acres, and carried 44,000 sheep that annually cut 900 bales of wool. Also there were 700 miles of fences and 70 windmills. On my first day I was one of a group that mustered 3,200 sheep on horseback from a 15,000-acre paddock called Duchess. Numbers are very big in Kimberley!

The diary goes on to say that the mosquitoes were also numerous and that I was eaten alive during the night, and that frogs were everywhere, even in the lavatory bowl. I also did a lot of riding to muster sheep and a lot of driving natives around in a truck, helping to put up and take down temporary sheep yards. I read that we marked thousands of lambs by cutting off their tails and

that it was the Aborigine women who used to catch them for us while we worked with the knives. That entry brings back memories of lots of laughter, rude jokes and ample bosoms popping out of shirts made from old flour sacks.

The Paradise homestead was very basic and totally misnamed. I remember concrete floors and fly-wire netted walls policed by gecko lizards that ran around gobbling up mosquitoes. The dining area was a separate building attached to a cookhouse manned by more laughing Aborigine women.

As the road from Derby to Fitzroy Crossing passed the homestead we had quite a few visitors who stayed overnight. One of these was the Fitzroy policeman, Buster Thorpe, who told us that he was about to make a 700-mile ride over the Leopold Ranges. I said that it sounded a very exciting trip and he kindly invited me to join him. I put the invitation away in the back of my mind, just in case there was a chance of taking him up on it.

I stayed at Paradise for five weeks helping with the shearing and then got a lift back to Derby to meet Uncle Syd who had arrived from England. I often wonder what has happened to the hundreds of people I have met throughout my life. Robin Campbell was only a couple of years older than me, but had an enormous job that he did extremely well. I would be fascinated to know how his life had panned out.

'GoGo' station, 'Perth to Darwin 2,000 m'

I met Uncle Syd in Derby and we flew up to GoGo Station in a very old Dakota aeroplane that took mail and supplies around the stations. It was fascinating to look down on the country that I had been riding over for the last five weeks. We flew along the course of the great Fitzroy River and the country looked quite green from the air, although I now knew that it was mainly rubbish weeds of no value as fodder for the animals. The over-stocking with

sheep and cattle of the alluvial flood plains of the river since the first graziers arrived in 1881 had eaten out most of the nutritious native grasses.

On May 25th I met Buster Thorpe again in the Fitzroy Hotel. He said that he was still willing to take me along on his epic ride, which was to be the last mounted police patrol over the Leopold Range because the following year it was planned to bulldoze a road north from Fitzroy Crossing to Gibb River Station. I really wanted to go so summoned up courage and asked Uncle Syd if it would be possible to borrow four mules and an Aborigine tracker for the trip. Two of the mules would be for riding and two for our gear. The tracker was needed to help Bohemia Jack, the police tracker, handle the mules. Uncle Syd was very generous and provided me with the four mules and Jacky Bill.

My mule above 'Fitzroy River', 1955

So began one of the great experiences of my life, one that turned out to have many extraordinary ramifications. If I hadn't made the trip, so many astonishing things just would not have happened. The trip lasted exactly a month and the diary is packed with details which are far too boring to record here, but when I arrived back in Melbourne for Christmas my father made me sit down and write the following précis:

THIRTY DAYS IN THE WILDERNESS

On June 7th I set out with Buster Thorpe on a historic trip, the last mounted police patrol to ride the Leopold Range. The following year the constable was to patrol his 14,000 square mile beat from the seat of a jeep rather than a mule.

With us we had two black boys, Bohemia Jack and Jacky Bill. Bohemia Jack had been with the police for about 30 years and was credited with two

murderers' scalps, while Jacky Bill was a GoGo boy. We had not gone far before the GoGo boy was re-named Billy, as two Jacks proved confusing.

Our mode of transport was on mules. We had twelve in the 'plant', six for riding and six for the packs. Also we had two horses. Mules without horses will split and wander at night, whereas with horses they will stay bunched together while grazing, making it easy to round them up in the morning.

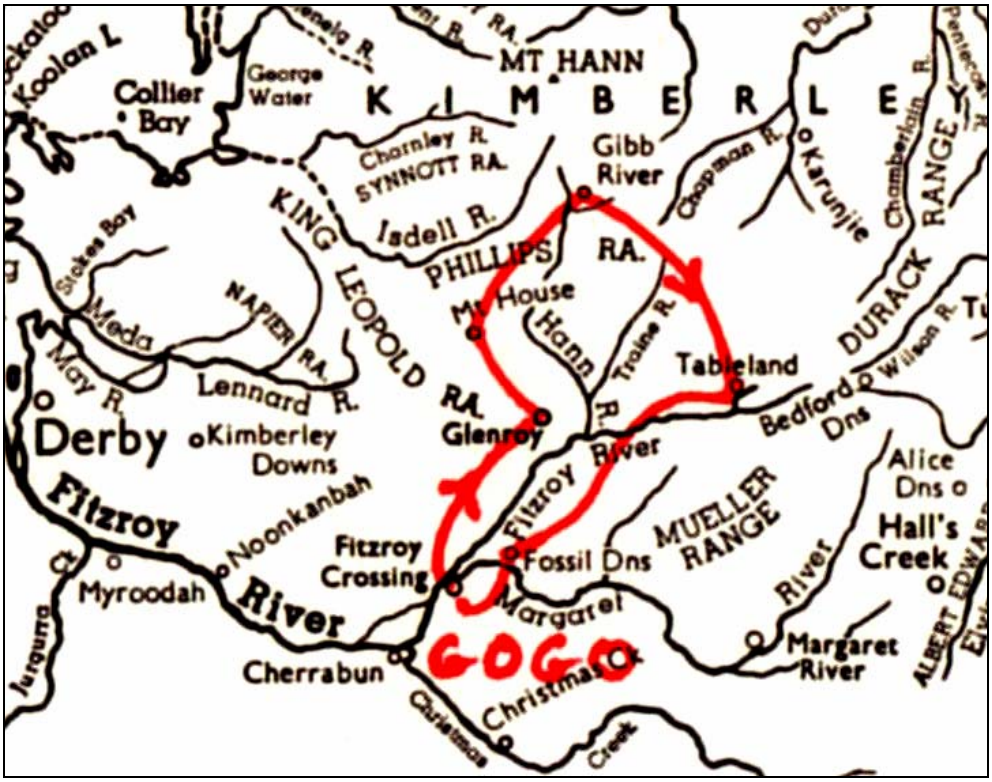
PC Buster Thorpe

On the first day we crossed the bare flood plains of the Fitzroy River up to Brooking Gorge. We camped early and packed up before turning in so as to be sure of an early start in the morning. However, two of the GoGo mules I had been lent thought otherwise. In the morning we tracked them back the ten miles to Fitzroy Crossing. They were on their way home!

Bohemia Jack told me that once a Fitzroy mule was lent to a drover going to Wyndham. When he arrived there he forgot to short hobble the animal in his hurry to get to the pub for a beer and the mule turned up back in Fitzroy five weeks later after travelling 600 miles on its own! After hearing this story I always made sure my mule was short hobbled!

That afternoon we climbed through Brooking Gorge and crossed the Oscar Range arriving at Leopold Station homestead at sunset. The Oscar rock is a sharp limestone that made the mules' feet sore. The most impressive thing about the Oscar is that the 50-foot high outcrop is actually an ancient fossilised coral reef.

On arrival the manager's children at Leopold Homestead made us play tennis even though it was nearly dark, and at first light we were dragged out of bed to play again! We spent the day shoeing the front feet of the mules and went to bed early as the next day we had 40 miles to cover to Fairfield, an out-station of Leopold. It rained during the night, so we were lucky to have a roof over our heads.

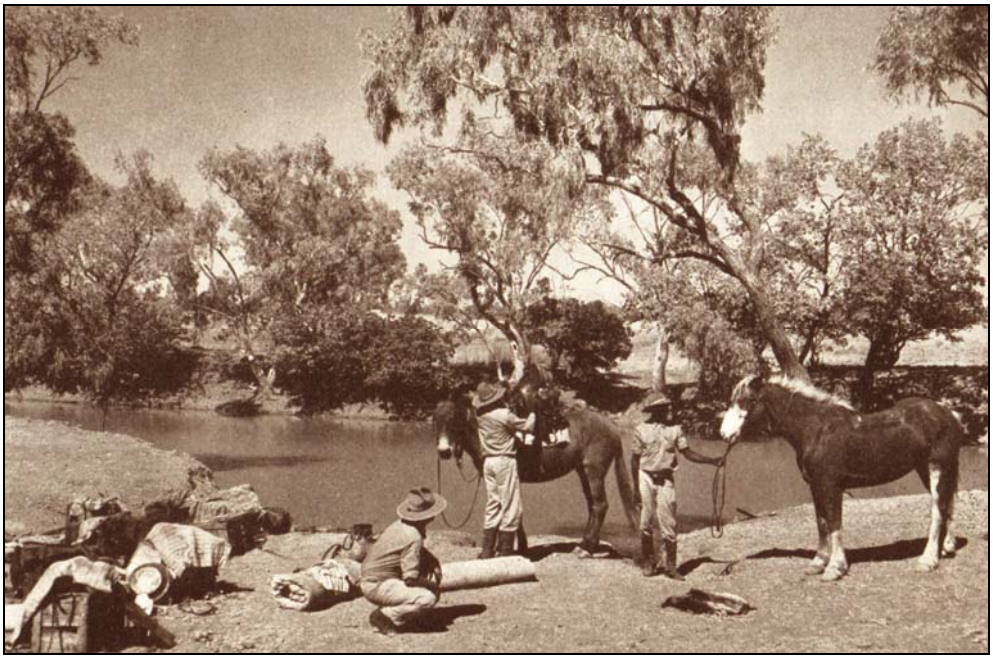


Fitzroy Crossing to Gibb River, Kimberley

The morning brought a stroke of luck. Paddy, the manager, decided to deliver stores to Fairfield, so we threw all our gear onto his truck and left the boys to bring the mules along on their own. We bounced along the rough track over the black-soil plains covered with eight-foot high rank Mitchell grass. Following the Napier Range we arrived at Fairfield safe and sound after a very quick trip, instead of riding for nine hours!

We spent the day with Bill Rathenbury who was building a house for Paddy. Bill had the place very well organised. He didn't have to look for the eggs the hens laid as there was only one place they did lay – on his pillow! He led a very lonely life and, as he was a rum drinker, had a tough time because Paddy had him on short rations. Unfortunately, he got his ration that day.

On the 12th we set out at sunup and passed through McSheady Gap. We had no trouble with the pack mules that morning as they had settled down at last. When we had set out from Fitzroy Crossing two packs were thrown off in the first ten minutes. We passed through McSheady Gap and entered the Leopold Range proper. The gap is characteristic of the whole mountainous region, high vertical red cliffs called Jump Ups reaching in height anything up to a thousand feet. We followed the plain along the cliffs for about ten miles and then up a creek and through a gap into an area called Richenda. After a couple of hours we reached the Bricon Creek and camped on a waterhole.



Camping on a waterhole

Next day we set off again having rested the mules and two horses, following Bricon Creek along for some way and then cut across the range to Black Mountain. We had a good view of the country from the top of the Jump Up we had to pass over to get onto the Black Mountain plain that was very green and covered with eight-foot high spear grass.

Surrounding the plain are red sandstone mountains that are a stark contrast to Black Mountain itself which stands dark and foreboding, a colossal heap of dark brown stones with no vegetation growing on it at all. We crossed the plain and rode down to the Richenda River. We followed along the banks of the river for about ten miles and camped the night on a rocky waterhole. The river was not flowing, but looking at the debris left high in the branches of trees along the banks we could see that an awful lot of water flooded down it in the Wet.

Next day we continued along the river. We were glad to get going as that night the largest mosquito I have ever come across invaded us. We left Richenda River at the foot of Mt Broom. This massive tableland mountain is made of red sandstone and its sides go up vertically for at least 1,000 feet above the plain. All the mountains around this area look the same – massive and foreboding.

We climbed up a very steep 300-foot high Jump Up. The mules are really marvellous climbers and they pick their way over the loose stones and between the jumble of rocks with no trouble at all. The pack mules do a remarkable job carrying 300 lbs each. We travelled on until we came to the foot of Mt Millie Windie. We could see large black clouds on the horizon that evening and as it looked as though it was going to rain we piled all the packs and saddles in a row about twelve foot long and two foot high and over which we stretched a tarpaulin. As we finished it started to rain heavily and continued all night so the four of us were very glad to be under shelter.

We were up early in the morning and soon came to the first Jump Up. From the top we could see Mt Millie Windie with Mt Ord dominating it to the

left. Inspector Ord was one of the first policemen in Kimberley and Bohemia Jack said that he was particularly tough on the Blacks. We passed into Millie Windie Gap. An old bullock track once ran through the Gap, as all the stations north of the range got their supplies via this route in the olden days. When we had gone through the pass we climbed up yet another Jump Up and then up yet another. By this time the mules were getting very tired as we had been travelling all day and had climbed four very rough Jump Ups.

Aerial view of 'King Leopold Range' and 'Jump Ups'

We crossed this plateau and arrived at Jack's Bowl that is an extraordinary crater about a mile across with a nearly circular rim that falls almost vertically for 600 feet. The way down is a spur that is the only break in the cliff. We picked our way down this with reins in one hand and hanging on to the mule's tail with the other!

Running out of the bowl was a dry riverbed that cuts through a gorge of red sandstone. The walls are sheer and it is so narrow that the sun only shines in it for a couple of hours a day. From the gorge we came out into the Walsh and found a deep rock waterhole where we camped for two days to rest the mules. The hole abounded with bream and crocodiles. Buster fished all day but caught nothing. When we had rested up for a while we travelled on into Mt House Station. Mr and Mrs Doug Blythe welcomed us and we stayed for a day talking about the air beef industry they were trying to establish. The cattle were killed on the station and then flown to Darwin in an old Dakota war plane before being frozen and shipped to Singapore.

We were very glad to leave and get away from the smell of the slaughterhouse. We camped under the Phillip Range and crossed over it next day. On top of this plateau there is a forest of cypress pines. Jack showed us a

tree where the bark had been stripped with a stone axe by the natives on Walkabout to tap the sap for glue to attach flint spearheads to wooden shafts.

We came down off the Phillip Range and had lunch at Muirs Camp that had been deserted for 50 years. A crystal clear creek runs past here with pandanas growing thick all along it. After lunch we pushed on into Mt Barnett Station. As the husband was away and Buster did not know the woman we camped a little further along the Barnett River.

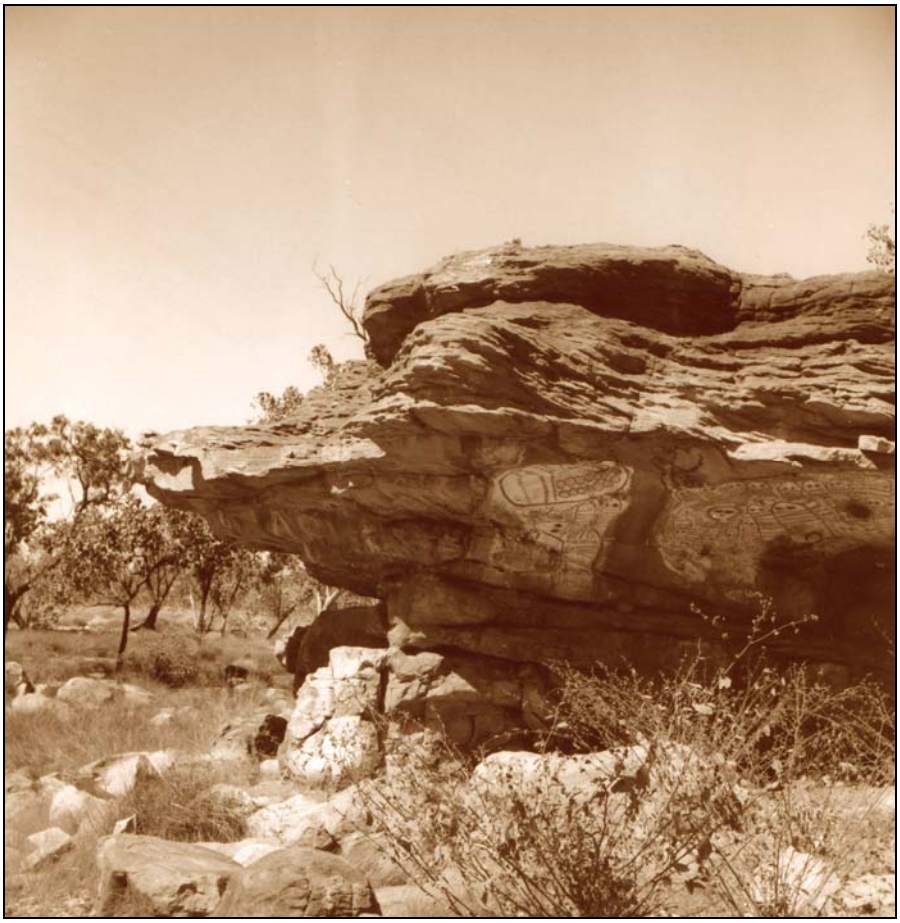
We broke camp early and pushed off. We were meant to have lunch at Snake Creek about 20 miles further up the track, but when we got there we found the creek was dry so we had to go right through to Gibb River Station. This was about 40 miles and we did it in nine hours. Boy was I glad to get off my mule! On the way we crossed the dry Hann River that we were to cross again later near Glen Roy Station.

Mrs Russ with her children

Frank Russ, the manager of Gibb River, was out mustering but his half-caste wife and her five children gave us a great welcome. I greatly admire the wives of men in Kimberley for they live alone most of the time. Mrs Russ had a good garden with bananas and pineapples that she watered by bucket from a well. We rested up for a day, while Buster fixed the lighting plant and got the truck engine going again.

June 23rd 1955, a red-letter day

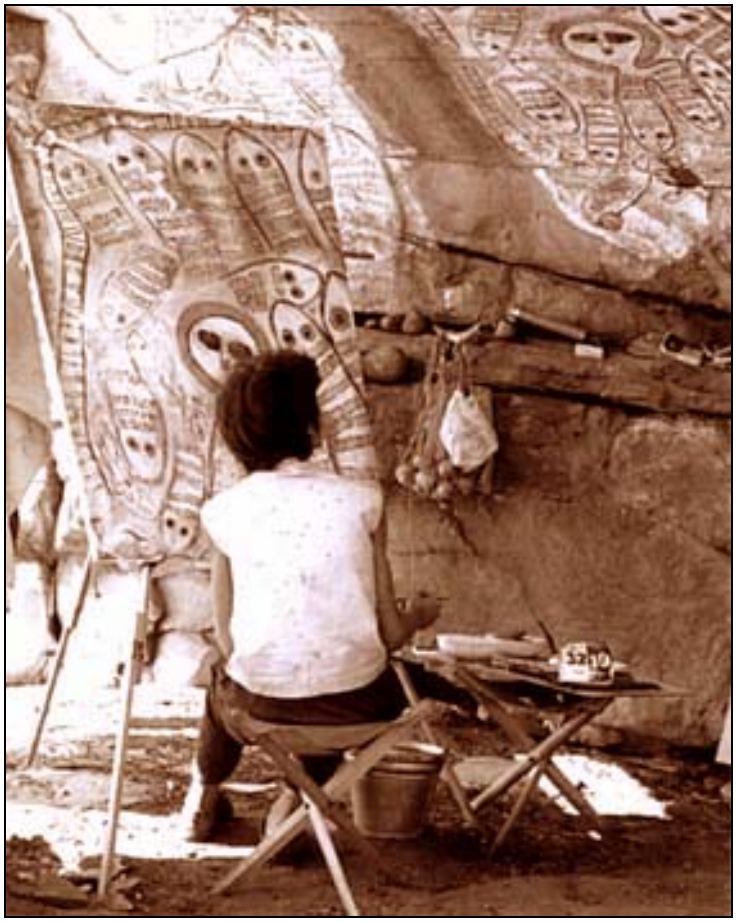
We rode out from Gibb River Station to find Dr Andreas Lommel and his wife, Katharina, who were studying native paintings for Munich's Natural History Museum. It took us an hour to ride out to the Lommels' camp and they were very surprised to see us come out of the Bush without any warning. One of the reasons that Buster was on patrol was to check what these two German scientists were doing, so he had put his police badge on his hat and strapped a revolver around his waist!



'Ngungunda' rock shelter where we met the Lommels

Buster introduced himself and then Andreas made us a cup of tea and explained how they were taking tracings of the paintings that would then be transferred to canvas by Katharina back at the station. She would then return to the site and copy the exact colours with oil paint. Andreas told us that if the natives wanted rain they would bash the bigheaded figures on the nose with a rock and we could see the damage for ourselves. It was fascinating listening to him explain all this to us, but I noticed that Jack and Billy stayed well away from the paintings, as they obviously didn't like the place.

Andreas explained that the paintings are of the gods and are done in the shelter of mushroom-shaped rocks to keep the rain off. They paint with a chewed stick for a brush using red or yellow ochre on a white chalk background. The Rain Gods have large heads and no mouths and are called Wandjinas. The Aborigines also paint a lot of big fat serpents.

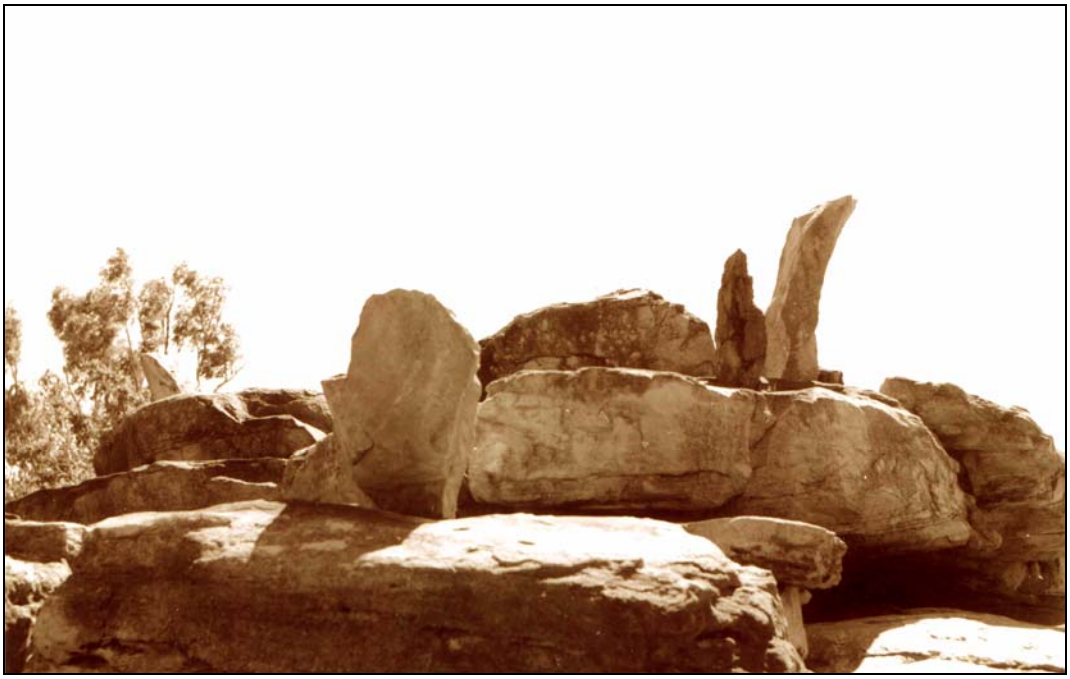


'Katharina' copying the 'Wandjina' painting

The main painting was of a serpent encircling a little girl figure. Andreas told us that the Aborigines believe their souls come from a snake that lives in the waterhole and when the man wanted a child he would collect a little soul from the snake and give it to his wife. When a child is born it belongs to the waterhole where the snake lives so this is the child's country. If possible he must die by the waterhole, so his soul will go back to the snake.

The main painting is a snake with a little girl

Around the site were several rock slabs that had been stood upright and Andreas said that these represented serpents coming out from the burrows.



Serpents coming out of the burrows

It was time to push on so we said goodbye and I think the Lommels were glad to see us leave. On the way back to the station Jack told us that the best way to make rain was to file clear crystal that he called Rain Stones. He warned us that we must not smash the stones or lightning would burn our houses, which is why the stones should only be gently filed to cause rain!

We left Gibb River Station and followed the Hann River for a while before climbing out of the valley up into another one. We went along Pussy Cat Creek till it ran into the Train River. We followed the Train down to Sidons' homestead that was built by one of the earliest settlers. This country is mostly sandy and grows only useless wheat grass. We branched off the Train and rode into the Tableland Homestead. We did not get a very good welcome here as the previous year Buster had charged the manager with receiving stolen horses and had taken 20 from him!

We pushed on down the Train till we got to Red Lake where we saw a native boundary. In the old days the natives had the country split up into hundreds of small areas, each one having its own language and laws. These areas were divided off from each other by boundaries marked with heaps of stones called Sneezing Heaps. If a native was caught hunting in someone else's country he was killed. The first white men in the Kimberley called the stone piles Sneezing Heaps because every time the natives went past them it sounded as though they sneezed. In fact they were forcing air out through their nostrils as a way of stopping the evil spirits in the heaps from entering their bodies.

At Red Lake, Buster caught a few small fish that he used as bait to catch a crocodile on a shark line for the boys. They cooked the creature in a bed of hot coals and then persuaded us to try some of the tail. It was quite disgusting and smelt of rotten fish.

'Bohemia Jack' with dinner

Jack told me that human beings were not considered 'good tucker' so natives did not eat their flesh! However, the kidney fat was always eaten by the man who did the killing, as he believed this gave him the strength of the dead victim and made him twice as strong.

From Red Lake we re-crossed the Hann River and arrived at Mornington Station. Here we spent a night with Frank Bridge who had two black wives looking after him and had a very good paw-paw garden. Next morning we set out again and followed Connor's Valley up to the Fitzroy River. The valley is very steep sided and the only way to get out is by following the gorge that the river has cut. We crossed over the ridge and proceeded to do a most frightening zigzag climb up the face of the cliff. The view from the track was terrific as we looked straight down into the river 300 feet below us crowded with crocodiles. We crawled along the all-too-narrow edge and I nearly died of fright when my mule stumbled. He went down on his two front knees but luckily recovered his footing, so from then on the scenery was forgotten. I would have jumped off if there had been room.

At the top we stopped and had a well-earned cigarette before I was told that the worst was yet to come, as we had to go down the other side. The boys were quite right – the worst was yet to come. We had to descend 500 feet in loose gravel at an angle of one in one. I swear my mule did not take more than

two steps to complete the distance as we slid most of the way surrounded by a lot of rolling gravel.

From here on the rest of the trip was a bit dull. No Jump Ups or Slide Downs, just easy going. We followed the river down the west boundary of old Leopold Station then crossed over to Fossil Downs. We camped at Margaret Crossing, but only stayed until the full moon gave us enough light to ride the last ten miles into Fitzroy Crossing. So ended a 30-day 700-mile ride through the Leopold Range.

I wrote that account 50 years ago when I was 20 years old. What I didn't know then was that I was completely hooked by this wild and wonderful country, nearly empty of people and completely untouched by the modern world. The mule ride over the King Leopold Range with Buster was the beginning of my love affair with Kimberley. Since then I have been lucky enough to have had four opportunities to enjoy the beauty and mystery of this special place.

In 1981 I returned with my son, Peter, and some friends to climb Mt Agnes. I told Damon de Laszlo about this trip and he asked me to organise a trip for him and his family in 1989. After my telling Robert Hefner III about the amazing trip that Margie and I had done with Damon, he asked me to organise one for him and his son, Charles, in 1991. For this trip I suggested that we employ Grahame Walsh as a guide. I had met Grahame quite by chance in 1989 with Damon on Mt Elizabeth Station. I knew that he was an expert on Wandjina paintings as he had written a book about them that I had bought. Robert wanted to see Wandjinas and Grahame knew where hundreds were hidden.

Grahame agreed to be our guide and we had a superb trip with him. While sitting around the campfire one night Grahame mentioned the name Andreas Lommel and I told him that I had met him when I was 20 years old on Gibb River Station. He was very surprised and went on to tell me that he was still alive and living in Munich, so it was my turn to be stunned.

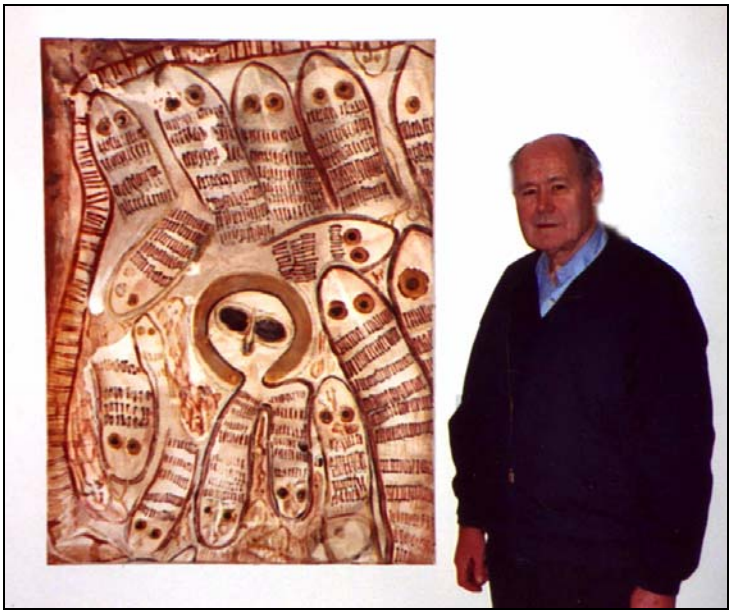
Grahame said that he would give anything to meet Andreas and Katharina as they had found some breathtaking Wandjina paintings and were the only people who knew their location. I made contact with Lommel on my return to England and when Grahame came to London I took him to Munich.

'Andreas and Katharina' both aged 80

The Lommels asked us around to their apartment to discuss the Wandjina paintings that he had found and his wife had copied. It was a great pleasure to meet them both again after so many years. They remembered the day Buster and I had ridden into their camp unannounced very clearly as they immediately saw that he was a policeman and wondered if they had broken some law by copying the paintings!

Katharina's Wandjina Crocodile painting, Sundron

Next day Andreas took Grahame and myself to the Munich Natural History Museum to see the paintings that his wife had done on that trip that are truly amazing, some being ten foot long. It was very strange to see the painting that I had watched Katharina working on in 1955.



With Katharina's painting done in 1955

That evening I took Andreas and Katharina out to dinner to celebrate our reunion after a gap of 38 years. What a delightful couple and what an eventful life he had led! During dinner he regaled us with stories of his time with the Unambal Tribe in 1938 and his second trip in 1955 when Buster and I had invaded their privacy.

Andreas had first visited Kimberley in 1938 with the Frobenius Institute of Frankfurt. The Institute had mounted an expedition to study the primitive peoples of Kimberley and in particular the Unambal. The Aborigines of this area were still living in the Stone Age and had only just come into contact with White Man. While others of the Frobenius group collected artefacts, Lommel studied the natives.

Unambal Aborigines photographed by Lommel in 1938

Grahame Walsh has since published a book by Andreas documenting all the information he collected in 1938. The book includes some of his unique black and white photographs of Corroboree dances as well as a wealth of material on the social life of the tribe, which he told us had completely

disappeared by his second trip in 1955. He then went on to tell me about his WWII experiences which I think are quite amazing and should be recorded.

Andreas arrived back in Germany at the end of 1938 and was immediately conscripted into the army and transferred to Rommel's Afrika Korps that invaded Libya in 1941. He was at Tobruk when it was defended by the famous Australian Desert Rats and at the German defeat at El Alamein. He could see very clearly that this was the end of the Korps as the retreat had turned into a rout. Because the British had command of the air the convoys of fleeing trucks could only travel at night, being forced to hide in woods along the road during the day so they could avoid being attacked.

One day he decided he had had enough but as they were guarded by SS soldiers to stop desertion he pretended to have an upset stomach. After he had made several hurried trips in and out of the trees the guards got slack so on his last departure he just kept walking until he found a place to hide. He stayed there until the fighting passed before walking back to the road to wait for an English truck to appear.

When he had made sure that the trucks passing were British and not German he decided it was time to give himself up before an Arab found him and slit his throat for the reward. Eventually a lone truck happened to pull up near where he was hiding and the driver got out for a pee. Andreas grabbed the chance to give himself up and walked up to the soldier with his hands held high. The soldier swung round and put his arms up as well. It must have been a wonderful sight, both men surrendering at the same time! Lommel spoke English and was able to convince the Tommy that it was he who wanted to be taken prisoner and was able to climb on to the back of the truck.

Andreas was shipped back to a POW camp outside Cairo and because he spoke English he was put in charge of the camp school and told to give English lessons to the prisoners, which was a very agreeable job with a few privileges. The only problem was that the camp soon started to fill up with Nazi SS officers who immediately saw that Andreas had the best job in the camp so ordered him to enrol them also as teachers, which he definitely didn't want to do.

He got out of having to do this by inventing a fictitious test saying that the British would only take on teachers who understood Latin, which of course he could do himself. He told the Nazis that if they wanted to become teachers they would have to answer a written test in Latin that would be marked by an English officer. Of course none of the SS knew any Latin so he avoided having to take them on as teachers!

The Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt had survived the bombing of the last war and Andreas arranged for Grahame and me to visit it. The Institute is housed in a dark musty building full of books and papers on Rock Art from around the world. He also arranged for us to visit the warehouse of the Frankfurt National History Museum where one of the largest collections of Australian Aboriginal art in the world is stored. We walked through room after room full of decaying treasures. Our time was short so we were not able to study closely what was in the showcases, but we could see that much of the organic material was being eaten by insects, leaving things like bird feather headdresses in tatters. It was a very distressing sight.

Our interest was to see the Wandjina bark paintings. When we arrived at the door of a large room we just stood and looked, absolutely stunned. The room was full of hundreds and hundreds of bark paintings stacked against each other like Roman soldiers' shields. We could not believe our eyes. We were only able to look at the front few as they were jammed together so tightly we couldn't move them around. What a shame and what a loss there would be if there was a fire as the bark was tinder dry and crumbling!

After the war Andreas returned to Munich, married Katharina and was made Head of the Natural History Museum. He was a remarkable man and she a superb artist and two of the nicest people I have ever met. Katharina died at the end of 2004 and Andreas a couple of months later in 2005.

I wonder what has happened to PC Buster Thorpe. I shall never be able to thank him enough for allowing me to come with him on that epic ride in 1955. Back at GoGo I was sent out into the mustering camp to help round up fat cattle for market. I was then asked if I would like to take part in a 300-mile trek to the port of Derby down the stock route that runs along the banks of the Fitzroy River. How could I refuse?

I wrote an account of my days on GoGo and as a cattle drover so for fun will again include what I scribbled a lifetime ago.

GOGO

When I got back to GoGo I went straight into the Cherabun camp. GoGo consisted of three stations, the others being Margaret Downs and Christmas Creek, an area of three million acres!

The mustering camps usually consist of about 25 native boys and are run by a half-caste, with a few Aborigine women looked after the tucker. Although the food is rough it is excellent and I am sure is much better for you than all the rich food you eat from takeaways nowadays. Damper is baked every other day in an iron camp oven buried in red hot coals.

We took a week to muster the 400 bullocks needed for the Perth-bound boat. Every day we would set off at daybreak to sweep a strip of country with the boys split into three groups to do a pincer movement on the cattle, with the main party mustering the middle. We would meet at a pre-arranged waterhole where the cattle would be herded into one mob and watched by a couple of men, while the rest of us went into camp to have dinner and get fresh horses. This midday meal would usually be enjoyed at about ten o'clock.

Mounted on fresh camp horses, specially picked and trained for the job, we would start the draft so it would be finished before the day got really hot. Drafting when taken slowly is quite easy as the horses know exactly what they are meant to do and are eager workers. However, once the mob is stirred up things are liable to get very troublesome. Bullocks are continually breaking away and have to be brought back, which tires the horses unnecessarily and stirs up a cloud of dust as thick as a London fog. The prime bullocks are cut out to a small mob of cows and calves that help to quieten the bullocks. When all the prime bullocks have been mustered the cows and calves are separated and set free.

While all this is going on the Tailers have appeared with the herd of bullocks from yesterday's muster. They add the new bunch of steers and then disappear to a waterhole nearby where they camp during the heat of the day

before taking the bullocks out to feed in the afternoon. As the sun disappears the Tailers return and bed the cattle down in a circle. The first watch takes over and for the rest of the night the cattle are patrolled by two riders walking round and round. When the mob reaches 400 head of fat bullocks they start the walk to Derby and then are shipped south by boat to Perth for slaughter for meat to be sold in Asia.

In the Cherabun camp I did a different watch each night but soon found out that the three o'clock watch was the best one because you got a continuous sleep, which is why it is known as the Boss's Watch. Also the cooks get up at that time, which means you can get a hot cup of coffee before going out on watch.

Cutting out a bullock

While watching the cattle you must sing or make a continuous and soothing noise. This is to tell them you are around and warn them not to try anything foolish. Cattle are nervy beasts and if they hear your horse stumble on a really dark night they are liable to stampede, but if they can hear you singing it reassures them there is no danger and they will stay lying down. The two riders walk their horses at the same speed and on opposite sides of the circle. Because of the singing you can also tell exactly where the other man is. The Aborigine stockmen sing native Corroboree songs which is a fantastic sound to listen to on a starlit night.

On the first night of being on watch I sang every conceivable song I could remember. Later on in the week I settled down to three or four but before long it became the same song right through the watch. After a lifetime of cattle watching I was told you sing the 'brand' song.

"XR7 is the Cherabun brand – the Cherabun brand is XR7"

The 400 bullocks that were going to Perth were taken in hand by a half-caste foreman and three Aborigine boys who were told to take them back to GoGo

with me in tow. As soon as we left after lunch it started to pour with rain and continued to do so until we reached GoGo 24 hours later. Right at the height of the storm a herd of wild camels trotted by and as the one thing cattle don't like is the smell of camels, things very nearly got out of hand, but we managed to hold them together and eventually reached the Holding Yards wet through and miserable. After closing the gate on the cattle we hurried to the shed where our swags had been dumped. In the shed was a kerosene engine that drove the pump used to raise water from the nearby billabong for the cattle in the yard.

We had a blazing fire going in no time with the aid of some engine fuel we stole from a large drum that was on a six-foot high stand outside the shed. To get at the fuel we had to drop the drum which on hitting the ground nearly got away from us and went tumbling into the billabong, it was only just stopped by two boys standing up to their knees in the water!

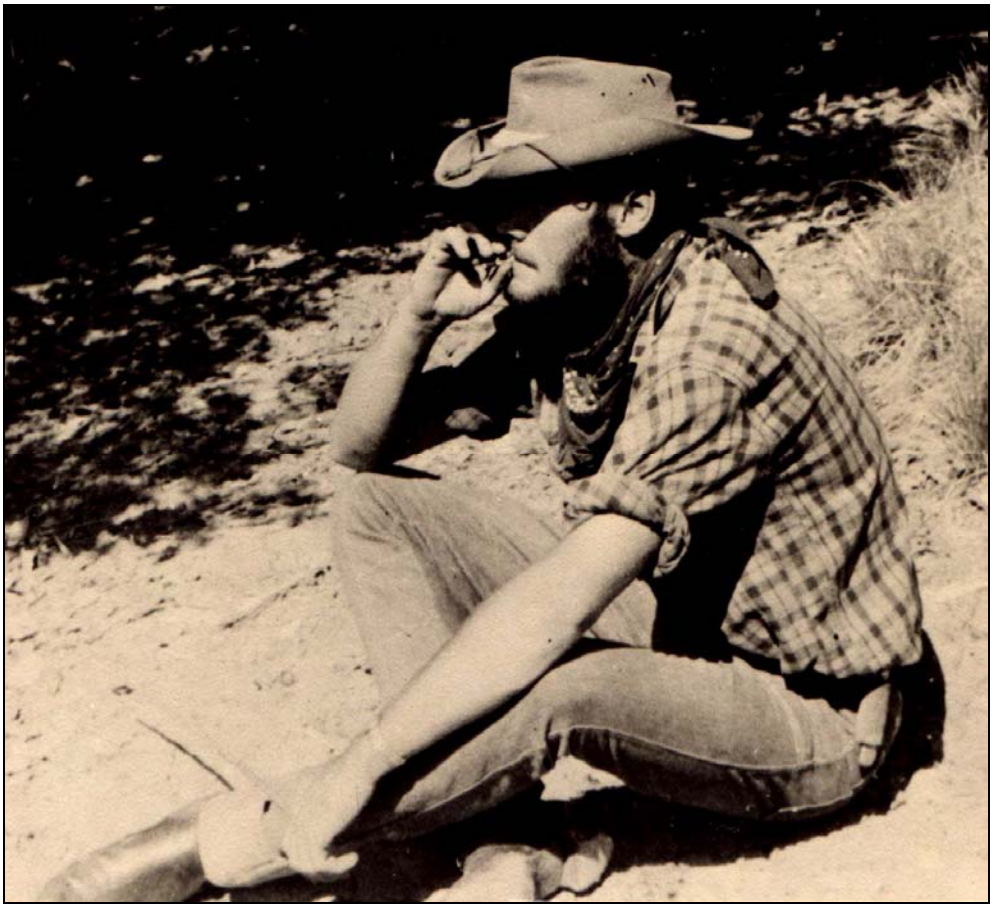
Johnny, Clancy the Boss, his wife Queenie, and Sandy, GoGo's head stockman

On returning to GoGo I joined Sandy Shaw's camp that was mustering the mob that I was going to help walk down to Derby. One of the reasons I was there was because I could write messages for Sandy that would be sent via an Aborigine stockman back to the station manager telling him how many cattle we had and where we were camped. We collected 410 steers in about a week and took them to a pre-arranged place where the drover boss, Clancy Doherty, was waiting. Sandy handed over the cattle and me for the 200-mile walk down to Derby that would take 30 days.

For the first few days I was bored to tears and missed the excitement of the muster camp. The pace of the feeding cattle ruled our lives as the order of the day was, *don't push 'em, take 'em easy*. Eventually I became like one of the cattle. Droving is the slowest way to get nowhere but once I settled in to it I began to enjoy the relaxed lifestyle and the whole experience. I actually got to

know certain beasts and would talk to them! I had been given a wonderful grey horse that knew exactly what to do to the extent that I needn't really have been sitting on his back. My main job was to keep the flies out of his and my eyes with a leafy whisk.

We reached the boundary of Paradise Station and I rode over to the homestead to say hello to Robin Campbell whom I had worked with earlier in the year when he was shearing the 19,000 sheep he cared for.



The moustache didn't grow!

As a drover you spend up to 16 hours a day in the saddle. The food we ate while droving was very simple. The day's meals consisted of a lot of coffee made with muddy billabong water, unleavened bread called damper and boiled salt beef, while chewing on an apple-sized raw onion, which was our only vegetable. I actually got to really enjoy eating raw onion although I can't imagine what my breath smelt like. I avoided looking too closely at the chunks of salt beef that was stored under the chuck wagon on a canvas hammock, open to the flies!

Damper always reminds me of when I was a child and being told by my nanny not to drink my milk too fast, as it was liable to turn to a block of ice if I did. Damper does the same sort of thing, as if you don't chew it well it turns into concrete and then sits in the pit of your stomach for hours.

No droving trip is complete without a stampede so of course we had to have ours! It happened about ten o'clock on a clear night halfway to Derby. Bullocks are said to be one of the fastest animals in the world reaching up to

60 mph. Later I was told the mob passed within ten yards of my swag but I didn't see this as I am ashamed to confess I was under the cart. How I got out from my mosquito net and under cover in so short a time I don't know.

After the bullocks had passed by I came out and found that all the night horses had gone so there was no way I could help. I sat around till midnight and as nothing had happened went back to my swag. The boys arrived back at first light and after a count found that they had recovered all but ten. They also reported that they had smashed through five fences during the night!

Johnny, the head stockman, set off to track the ten missing bullocks with me tagging along to help bring them back if he found them. We must have travelled about 15 miles towards GoGo before Johnny said that they would end up back on the station and we should forget them. Next morning we pushed on and five days later we arrived at Yedda Plains, and on watch that night I was delighted to see the loom of Derby's lights, although we still had two days' riding before reaching the port.

The next obstacle in our way was a deep billabong called The Cutting. Johnny told me that on his last trip they had to make the mob swim across but it turned out that my horse was the only one who had to this time. As we were pushing the mob across, my trusty nag suddenly plunged into a deep hole and we both nearly disappeared, much to Johnny's amusement. Fortunately the horse found a firm footing before I remembered that I should have slid off and hung on to his tail. By staying in the saddle I did save my tobacco and my camera from getting wet. Later Johnny told me that man-eating saltwater crocodiles had been seen in the billabong!

Watering 410 cattle in a billabong

This dipping makes me think of billabong bathing which is a very tricky pastime. The problem about washing in a billabong is how to get from the water to dry land without getting completely filthy again while crossing the two-yard wide barrier of foot-deep mud along the bank. Actually it is

impossible so washing in a cattle trough is much easier as long as you have a bucket.

After The Cutting we quickly covered the last few miles and soon arrived at the mouth of the yards that led into the mile-long jetty leading down to the ship that was sitting high and dry on the mud flats. The ships come in at high tide and then slowly settle into the mud on the 30-foot ebb tide of the Kimberley coast. We had reached our destination and the job was done.

Next morning at four o'clock they started loading the cattle and had all 400 on board in a couple of hours. They used live electric wires taped to sticks to hurry the cattle along as time is very short. By midday the tide had floated the ship off the mud and it immediately set sail. Having lived with the bullocks for 30 days I felt very sorry to see them heading off to be slaughtered.

I must say something about the town of Derby, which lies at the mouth of the Fitzroy River that flows into King Sound. HMS *Beagle* of Darwin fame explored the sound in 1839 and sent a row boat up the Fitzroy River for 22 miles. Derby has the longest jetty, broadest mud flats and highest population of mosquitoes of any town in the world. The bar is full of cigarette smoke so walking in it is like cutting cheese with a knife and I have never heard so many different language all being talked at the same time. To counterbalance the bar the police use a hollow giant Boab tree as a prison to lock up drunks! A doorway had been cut into the trunk and a grill gate bolted to the outside.

The original Derby police prison was a hollow Boab

The only other extraordinary thing that happened to me while I was working on GoGo was to see a Flying Saucer, that were all the rage in those days. It happened when I was driving back from Christmas Creek to GoGo with the manager on a pitch-black night brilliant with stars. There was no moon and it was freezing cold and there were a couple of Aborigines riding on the back tray of the truck.

We were bowling along the dirt track that snaked away in front of us in the headlights, heading north up a flat valley about half a mile wide and bordered on each side by Jump Ups. Suddenly from the East a reddish gold Rugby ball shot across the valley and disappeared over the horizon in the West. It was impossible to tell whether it was 100 yards or half a mile in front of us, but if it was half a mile away it must have been huge.

The extraordinary thing about the event was that as it crossed in front of us the engine cut out and the headlights went out. The manager jammed on the brakes and we came to a squealing halt. When the orange shape disappeared over the horizon the headlights came on again. We climbed down from the truck and all began to talk at the same time asking the same question. "What the hell was that?" We were all quite frightened.

The manager got back into the truck, turned the key in the ignition and the engine sprang into life so we set off again talking about the event. It was a completely new experience to the manager who had never seen anything like it in the 45 years he had been in Kimberley, often travelling at night.

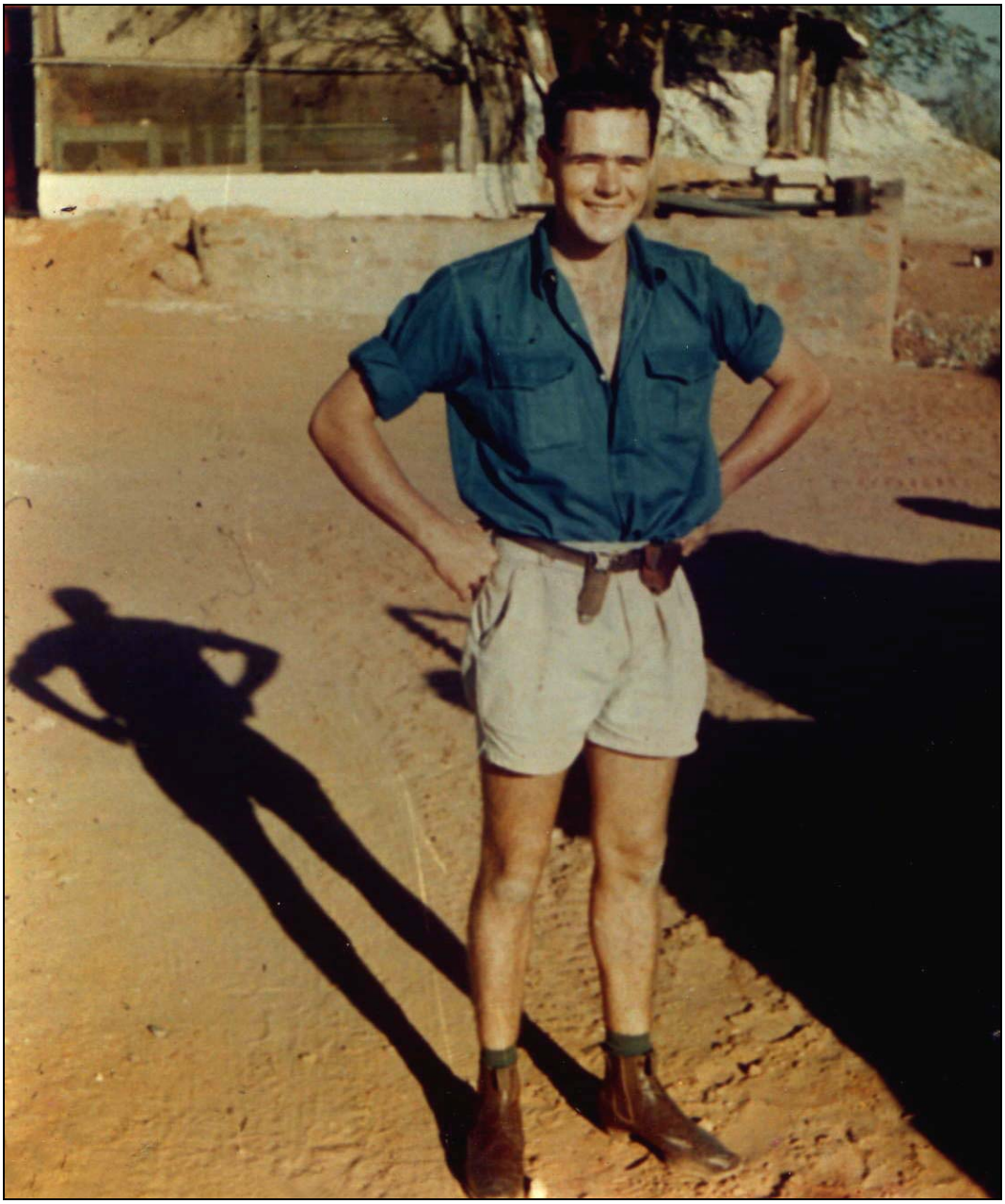
Years later I went to a lecture given by the TV presenter, Sir Patrick Moore, at our boys' school in Somerset. The headmaster asked me in for a drink after the lecture to meet the man so I told him my Flying Saucer story. He only laughed and suggested that it must have been what scientists call Ball Lightning, which they knew existed but have no idea exactly what it was. He said it certainly wasn't a Flying Saucer full of little green men!

Sadly my days in the Kimberley came to an end when the Monsoon rains arrived so I made my way up to Wyndham to catch the plane to Darwin. The Wyndham Hotel was a slice out of Australia's pioneer era as it had not changed since then. There were two sleeping verandas, one for men and one for women. I don't know what the women slept on but the men's veranda was bare boards and you just picked a free spot to roll out your swag. The gent's bathroom had a wonderful notice on the door that read, *No spurs to be worn in the bathroom, they ruin the lino.* I still have one of my spurs and use it for opening beer bottles!

I flew from Darwin to Brisbane to be best man for my brother, Mike, at his wedding to Bernice Grahame. Both my mother and father were at the wedding so we had a great family reunion. Returning to a city had its compensations but by now I was really hooked by the outdoor life and soon longed to be back in the Bush.

Aunt Peg, my father's sister, who had provided a home for Mike and me when we had been shipped out to Australia in the war, had come to the wedding and during a conversation she suggested that I should jackeroo for some friends of hers named Dampier-Crossley in New Zealand. My father thought that this was a very good idea as perhaps I could also work in the Swift's meat works as he knew the American owners. So it was decided and letters were dispatched.

Fortunately in those days letters were not electronic and took weeks to travel around the world so it would not be possible for me to leave for New Zealand until after the Christmas holidays, which meant that I could spend some time with my parents whom I had not seen for a year. I agreed to this plan as I thought a month doing nothing would be a wonderful way of celebrating the end of my second decade!



Kimberley, 'Land of Long Shadows'