

TABUBIL

An extract from my journal about my time spent working at Ok Tedi Mine in Tabubil, Papua New Guinea

Extreme is the first word that comes to mind when describing this place. Geographical isolation, landscape, rainfall, people, machinery and even the numbers all fall under the extreme umbrella. The remote and rugged environment makes life so different up here largely because of its isolation. The Star mountain range provides a natural border control as the only way into and out of Tabubil is by air. For this reason it's comparatively safe from those with a more nefarious intent as commonly seen in Port Moresby. No roads in or out is a big plus for security but a massive impediment to mine logistics. In the last financial year to June 30 2004, 580,000 tonnes of Copper Concentrate was exported and the expectation for this year is 700,000 tonnes, you can imagine the degree of co-ordination required to meet such a target.

It rains every day in Tabubil and has an annual rainfall of 12 metres. The mine is approximately 1800 metres above sea level. Each year approx 250,000 and 300,000 ounces of gold flow down the river as tailings. This equates in rough terms to USD 100 Million at 2005 prices. Cottage industries have sprung outside of the mine lease boundaries and no wonder with that sort of money.

The staff turnover here is high both for National staff and Expats. It's especially clicky for life as a married expat because the wives all hang out together with nothing to do but gossip. They are forbidden to do paid work and have nannies to do all domestic tasks.

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The locals (known as Nationals) are great and I've earned their respect. Word travels quickly around a small community, especially this one. The Tabubil population is approximately 15,000 people and like any small community, a new face is quickly identified. Best way to break that down is to get involved. I got into Boxing and Indoor cricket and quickly made a name for myself as the only white man in the respective arenas. I was also the unofficial photographer and once they knew me, had no issue posing for photos. Many have never seen themselves through this medium so it's not hard to imagine the thrill it held for them. I remember asking one of the Nationals what his age was and he said somewhere between 25 and 30!

With this sort of exposure, it didn't take long for news to spread of the new guy in town. I think it was around the 5 week mark of my contract when the Nationals began to call me the, "White Man" For instance, most greetings started with the obligatory PNG handshake and ended with a signoff of, "Aaaaarh Whiteman." More and more of the Nationals began using this expression which, just quietly, I was growing a bit tired of. Yes, I was white but I'd thought we'd already covered that off. We were equals. No black, no white, just people. I mentioned this to one of the ex-pats and he set the record straight. They were saying, "Right Man" which meant I'd been accepted.

That's ok then.

It appears that I'm now in a joint venture partnership with a landowner from the Southern highlands who has a large oil deposit in his backyard. This deal was brokered last night at a local dance, the premier event in Tabubil where a group of Nationals were remonstrating with security because they weren't ticket holders.

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Neither was I but was allowed through. The Highlander was becoming increasingly agitated and I felt sure this blatant racism would tip him and his crew over the edge. In an effort to prevent this escalating into something ugly, I offered to pay for the 4 of them and keep the peace.

Well that was it. The deal was done. The Highlander, a wealthy landowner with oil rights had compulsorily acquired me as his newly found business advisor. No white man had ever done something like that for him and he was obliged to repay me. And I was obliged to accept. Repeated attempts at a polite refusal were countered by his zealous enthusiasm for the lucrative venture that lay before us. He reminded me of Colonel Rambuka. I couldn't shake The Colonel. And thanks to the drunkard din of the masses, his lips were centimetres from my ear for much of the evening. He couldn't risk his message getting lost in the crowd but it made no difference anyway. I didn't understand a bloody word he said. I had to lose The Colonel and quietly slipped away into the night and back to sanctuary of my Donga...just another night in Tabubil.

The Highlander treaty spread quickly around town. I suspect that this fiasco led to The Cleaner dropping by two nights later. I was awoken at 5.00 am Monday morning to a knock on my door. Alert but not alarmed, I opened the door and was greeted by one of the cleaners employed to take care of daily domestic duties. Not only was he two hours early for his shift, I'd never seen him before. He reckoned he was a cousin of the regular cleaner but the cheeky fella wasn't on my doorstep for work. He wanted a cash donation for some bullshit sick auntie. He wanted 50 Kina (AUD 20) and told me how he would prefer the denomination. He promised to repay later that day but I

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knew it was a donation. Then he asked for a cold drink. And, yes, it was bluntly denied.

And then there was Jacques. An angry young bloke from Alabama in America's deep south. This 23 year old had apparently done it all. Last Wednesday I was enjoying a couple of beers after work with two others when this clown ambled over to introduce himself. After a few beers, his resentment on the world became evident and he engaged me in conflict, in a light hearted fashion to begin with. Initially it started with the fact that I wore a watch and wore clothes sans holes. So the niggling started and slowly escalated to the point where he had to call me a "Bitch" and "Whose gunna be your Daddy?"

It was like a chess game and slowly, devoid of emotion, I was de-constructing this lout by simply responding in calm, measured tones how I was impervious to his juvenile remarks and loose logic. He was going on about my watch, my shoes and that these accessories somehow put my sexual orientation into question. I said, "Did your Native American Mummy and Daddy teach you logic because Jacques is such a common Yankee name. Someone's yanking your chain all right!"

I knew it was going to end ugly because his taunts were going nowhere. His cage was getting rattled. It was my barb about his man boobs that tipped him. He was yelling and screaming about how I didn't know who he was and what he'd been through, etc. etc. etc... I said and "you've read my CV?"

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He lifted his top to reveal some jail bird tats. "Now that is an illustration of an undisciplined body" I said. The man boobies were not too flash. Violence was his only option.

His intent was clear as he made his approach. Let's fix this he said. I agreed and I took the necessary steps in readiness. Some counsel from his co-workers meant it remained at Defcon1 and five minutes later, he apologised. An odd man was Jacques.

Despite his apology, the mood was still tense at Defcon1. A week later I rolled up with a group of Nationals to the Hash club. It was around 1.00am and low and behold, there was Jacques causing a stir with some other bloke. A circle of spectators surrounded the two would be combatants as the other bloke ripped his shirt off signalling his intent for battle. It must be the custom up here. Anyway, they settled down but seriously, to quote the line from Stanley Kubrick's classic movie Full Metal Jacket, "What is your major malfunction numbnuts?"

It's now July and I'm entering the final stage of Tour de Tabubil. This weekend I'll be trekking to Lake Wangbin which will involve some serious effort to get to. A number of Nationals will accompany me and provided me with tips on etiquette around the Lake. I was told to be totally silent upon arrival because if the Lake hears us it'll get angry and we'll drown. Only if you know its name can you speak to it and request that it not kill you. Many of the National folk believe in sorcery and live in terrible fear of the spirits.

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I survived the adventure climbing the mountain to see this much revered Lake Wangbin. But I must say, there were moments that were very testing. Firstly never wear runners. It was diabolical climbing over wet slimey limestone covered in mud and dehydrating despite taking two litres of water. After climbing a harrowing 5 hours we arrived at our destination, Lake Wangbin. No disrespect intended but this trip was all about the journey. After a twenty minute lunch break, we began our descent.

I returned home for a brief visit before the final stint in PNG. The Ok Tedi Travel department book all airfares and transfers and usually it's all fairly straight forward. Part of my role is to review the cashflow and the state of the Debtors ledger and I discovered about AUD 150,000 which was about 2 years old hidden amongst other delinquent accounts. With the support of management, I began to apply some pressure to the slippery fella who owed the money. Problem was, his wife, worked in the Ok Tedi travel department and was responsible for all travel bookings.

Needless to say, I didn't have any problem getting TO Melbourne. The night before my scheduled return to Tabubil, I thought I had better check the itinerary Mrs Songoa (his wife) had booked. The flight she booked me onto arrived into Cairns at 12.50pm for a connecting Charter Plane leaving at midday!! Fantastic! After quite some work, the people at Qantas changed my flight to one that arrived in Cairns at 11.15am. This would give me 45 minutes to get to the Charter which was the only available option. Anyway, I got to Cairns at 11.15 am as scheduled and with great alacrity made my way to the luggage carousel. Midstride the PA system burst into life, "Calling passenger Adrian Payne. Final call etc etc" It's a 10 min walk to Cairns International terminal from Domestic but with 25 kilos of luggage(mainly bits and pieces I bought

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for the Nationals) it was an exhausting run. Got to the check in at 11.45am, somewhat concerned, desperate for oxygen but relieved. I was told that the plane had been waiting for 1.5 hours and that I should consider myself very lucky that they waited.

I promptly reminded the lady that I was 15 minutes early and just as promptly came the reply "So what....It's a Charter plane" Further follow up revealed that the time listed is the latest departure time not earliest (unplanned events aside). Anyway, I arrived in Tabubil safe but not sound. People tell you nothing up here.

You find out for yourself. You find out about yourself.

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