

Flying With My Angel - surviving religion, sex and helicopters, extracts

The photo above shows the author on his early form of transport, at the age of 20 months, in 1938, at Hermannsburg Mission, Central Australia.

Chapter 1 - 1944

White families at the Mission had a choice of free beef and so tongue, brains, heart, liver, kidney, as well as the normal fillets, were staple fare at our table. The disadvantage – there was beef or more beef unless an expensive tin was opened or one of Mother’s chickens lost its head. Sometimes a goat from the Mission herd was butchered. I remember one occasion when several visiting church leaders dined at our table.

Delicious meal Mrs Latz, lovely lamb,’ commented one and the others agreed.

Sorry, but there are no sheep in the Territory,’ my mother said innocently. That was goat you ate tonight. It’s a treat for us, after months of beef.’

On hearing this, the guests rushed outside and vomited. We could not begin to understand such people. When the men branded and castrated calves in the nearby stockyard we joined them unless constrained by schoolwork. The rocky mountain oysters’, bulls balls were thrown over the rails, caught and cooked in the fire used to heat branding irons. They were a delicacy that my aboriginal friends and I greatly enjoyed.

For people and the Mission to survive, every blade of grass and each gallon of water was precious. When possible, any animals we saw that were not our cows or working horses were shot. Kangaroos, emus, turkeys and any other edible game ended up on someone’s table. Old or disabled stock horses, having worked all their lives, were not put out to pasture, they were shot as well. I won’t attempt to explore the morality of this; it was just considered normal at the time.

Chapter 4 - 1959 Checking our three sets of pumps took twenty minutes. But each was on a different level underground, and the cage only ran to every level on the hour. The mine had ten levels carved into hard rock, descending to 400 metres (1310 ft) below ground. But the cage could be shuttling between a few different levels for long periods. We could not order‘ the cage like a normal lift. At 8.10 am, after logging in, collecting my miner’s lamp, helmet and battery I waited until 9 am to reach my first destination, three levels down. After taking ten minutes to look over the pumps, my head was in a book until 10.00 am when I dropped to my next destination. This is why twenty minutes work took four hours. To shortcut this procedure and show I was keen, I decided to use the ladders between levels instead of waiting for the cage. At Radium Hill the main vertical shaft servicing the mine consisted of four columns. The first contained the ore haulage skips. The personnel and freight cage travelled up and down the next vertical tube. Another shaft contained the counterweight that balanced the weight of the cage – when one went up, the other went down, requiring less power to raise an upcoming cage and less braking on the way down. Between these two columns a narrow space held ladders which reached from the bottom of the mine to the surface. The ten metre high, almost vertical steps zigzagged from one landing to another. This long thin chute, black as the inside of an ink bottle, rattled with scraping sounds as the skips and cage rushed past. Any lighting had long since failed; a well-charged miner’s lamp was essential. One morning, fed up with waiting, I found myself cheerfully descending a ladder into the depths of the earth when a rumbling noise came from above. It sounded like a large boulder was falling. Was it in the ladder shaft? In theory all of them were separated by a wire mesh barrier to prevent falling objects penetrating another shaft. Unfortunately, rusted mesh was not replaced as profits plummeted due to competition from new open cut mines. I was many metres from a landing that might have provided protection. The rumble came closer - a loud crash and thump above me pounded my ears as the intruder bounced from one wall to another. I froze on the ladder and craned my neck upward. The lamp seemed dim and showed only dust moving in the darkness above. Timing was crucial, if a boulder knocked me off the ladder I would fall to my death in the darkness, my final scream unheard. I had to wait and judge its trajectory after the nearest bounce. Another crash sounded and I saw the lump of ore approaching fast, several metres above me. Lunging behind the ladder, my feet dangling in space, my lamp showed a lump of rock half my size flashing past. The crashing noises diminished, replaced by the sound of gravel bouncing off my helmet. Heart pounding, I swung around again, my feet scrabbling to regain the ladder rungs. My legs pumped furiously as I scrambled down to the next level and left the ladders for the security of a horizontal shaft with solid rock above my head. Where did these large boulders come from? They fell off the top of overfilled skips carrying ore to the surface. Why were they overfilled? Simple, the skip loaders were contract staff paid by the tonnage delivered to the surface. Normally, personnel were not in the ladder shafts unless the cage was inoperative and underground workers were forced to climb to the surface at the end of their shift. If so, the skips would not be hauling ore. It seems my Guardian Angel had followed me underground.

Chapter 7 - 1964 In Darwin, the city nearest the equator predominantly inhabited by white Europeans, during the suicide season from November until the wet starts in December, the high temperature and humidity combine to make life very miserable for humans. Before air-conditioning arrived, this sometimes sent people over the edge. Once, after playing

squash at Darwin's only court, I visited the Victoria Hotel in the main street and downed pints of shandy to quench my raging thirst. While breasting the bar, I saw a man begin to climb up the tall water tower that stood at the rear of the hotel grounds. 'Betcha he jumps,' said someone. 'Nah, Rusty'll come back down, just wants to work up another thirst.' 'Yer got ten quid?' 'Sure.' 'OK, you're on!' More bets flew around the bar. As word spread people carried their beer to the back verandah to watch Rusty climb and then stand wobbling on the top platform next to the water tank, a good fifteen metres above the ground. 'Jump ya bastard,' shouted someone, 'I've got money on yer.' 'Come on down Rusty and I'll buy yer beer all afternoon,' came another cry. I didn't wait to see the outcome of this episode but Rusty's death was reported in next day's paper. It appears that quite a few people jumped from that tower over the years.

Eight months later in 1964: After packing up in Darwin, my girlfriend Janice and I headed down the track in my faithful Land Rover. We planned to spend a week relaxing at Edith Falls, just north of Katherine. A magnificent, unspoiled location, where I had previously taken other ladies. It was only accessible by four wheel drives back then and visitors were very rare, as were private four wheel drive RV's. I set up camp a few metres from the sparkling freshwater pool. Being October it was pleasantly warm and dry during the day. During our idyllic week we saw nobody and rarely wore clothes. After rolling out of our swag in the morning, we dived straight into the pool for a swim before breakfast. Another honeymoon without the wedding. My travelling fridge was well stocked with luxuries and naturally I had sufficient wine to stir the soul. A holiday I long remembered. I'm not sure how we spent our time but with a lovely naked lady constantly in attendance I don't remember being bored for a moment. One day, upstream in the gorge, we sat on a ledge with our backs being massaged by a waterfall while our legs dangled in the pool below. Soon, a dozen metre long Johnston crocodiles appeared only centimetres away from our feet. It seemed they liked the waterfall washing into their mouths. They hung vertically in the pool with only long open jaws above the surface. An interesting display of myriad needle sharp teeth. I was tempted to put a finger into this array of fangs but thought better of it and tried a stick. The croc, annoyed, just moved away from the intrusion and continued cleaning his teeth. After our blissful interlude, it was a dreary 800 mile drive to the Alice where Mother inspected Janice very carefully. We only stayed a few days before leaving for Adelaide. Mother was extremely concerned that only one bedroll was in evidence. I explained to her that the other one still had to be made up. Doubt showed in her face but she managed a smile as we left. I don't know what I said to Janice as I waved goodbye after our 'this is the end of the road' drive to Adelaide. She had been a loving regular partner after I helped her overcome a bad relationship. But my emotions and feelings were still kept in check by the barrier raised to protect me from being hurt again. Reinforced by a mental fight with religious beliefs and focus on my career path, which did not allow another person to claim me. We both sensed it was the end of our relationship. I did stay in contact and took her out for dinner in Canberra some months later. Years later when visiting London for the first time, I slept on the floor in her bedroom. She was engaged to a man she subsequently married.

Chapter 9 - 1966

One Saturday afternoon I flew Santa to a Christmas party on Sydney's North Shore (NSW, Australia), in a small 'bubble type' Bell helicopter. During the flight I sensed tension in the Tower's radio communications. It seemed something had upset the operators. After landing back at our office and hanger complex at 11th Street, Mascot International Airport, having completed my task, a

lot of people rushed outside. One of the engineers ran up to me and said, 'You're dead, didn't you know!'

'Well, I didn't think I looked that bad',. I wondered what all the fuss was about.

Fred explained why they were not expecting me to return. The only other, far smaller, helicopter operator in Sydney at that time was flying a film crew around the harbour when the tail rotor assembly separated from the tail boom. The loss of weight and lack of thrust from the rear caused the machine to enter an uncontrollably steep spinning dive. The cameraman continued to film until hitting the roof of Goldfields House in Circular Quay. All three people on board perished. I had flown past the area just before this happened. Our Company was the best known helicopter operator and a popular radio station incorrectly broadcast that our machine had crashed, killing all aboard. Hence the peculiar reception when I returned from the dead as the switchboard had been jammed with calls. This was my first time to be reported dead by the media. Funnily enough, it would happen again.

Chapter 10 - 1971

The gold exploration company I serviced weekly in the rough, jungle covered mountains behind Suva, Fiji, gradually spread its area of operation. Some days I visited numerous helipads on their lease. The camp dog, a friendly imported creature, often followed the workers. One day I dropped in to an outstation helipad to collect a geologist and both he and the dog got in.

'Don't worry, I'll hold Taffy's collar.'

After takeoff I turned my head and saw Taffy sitting quietly on the floor behind me, unrestrained. I'm sure he

attempted a smile to reassure me that he would behave. After that flight Taffy often traveled with me, sometimes the only passenger, using the helicopter as his personal transport. He often waited for me at outstation pads and when I opened the door, jumped in and behaved like a perfect mute passenger. Sometimes he politely declined to get off for several stops before leaving me to pursue his doggy interests. He never put a paw wrong, unlike some humans I have known.

One day I collected a sling load of roofing leaves and flew them to a new camp. The load of dry leaves hanging on the cargo hook was not heavy but completely filled a large net. During the flight it began raining and the leaves collected moisture like a sponge. This load had to be delivered some distance up into the hills. I struggled to climb as it became heavier and heavier. It was touch and go as to whether I'd make it or be forced to dump the carefully gathered building materials into the jungle. Just clearing the last ridge, I thumped the soggy leaves into the prescribed clearing. It was the first and only time I carried a load that must have more than doubled its weight in flight. I've had them decrease in weight when bits dropped off, fortunately over uninhabited jungle.

Chapter 14 - 1979 Trips to Brunei were no hardship as the country was yet to ban alcohol and the hospitality provided usually meant very social, late nights. I remember one overnight visit when I traveled purely to represent the company at our crew's Christmas party. From the time the Boeing's wheels hit the runway at Bandar Seri Begawan, until I left the airport having cleared customs and immigration, only three minutes elapsed. It's a hard record to beat and shattered all my previous best times for clearing an international airport. At Heathrow, on a bad day, I can recall a thirty minute wait before even disembarking the aircraft, followed by a ten minute walk to terminal three before joining a lengthy immigration queue. Brunei, being a Muslim country, meant prostitution was officially unthinkable. Yet, a few miles across the border, in Sarawak, young girls were provided to single males overnighing in a village longhouse as a sign of hospitality. Sarawak was also technically Muslim but in isolated villages old customs prevailed. It seems male transvestites were allowed in Brunei. Perhaps they provided some relief against the strict sexual mores. I was surprised to discover them working on offshore oil rigs. They flew out in our choppers as male 'unskilled' hands and returned to shore dressed in mini skirts, fishnet stockings and high heels, showing off their slim legs while sporting lavish makeup and hair styles. Such a change to find these foxy 'women' seated in our helicopters. An interesting contrast, compared to the burly redneck rig crews usually found travelling with us. It was a taste of the original Bugis Street in Singapore, where tourists flocked to rub shoulders with scantily dressed 'ladies' of the night, most sporting large bulges between their legs while mincing about on high heels and promising prospects a good time. We took many visitors there; it provided a total contrast to Singapore's soulless, scrubbed image.

2nd November, 1984

Soon after Singapore's Changi Airport opened they asked our Company to take promotional, aerial shots of their new showpiece gateway. The photo shoot was a fun trip for me. The experienced photographer knew where he wanted to be so we flitted around like a dragonfly between airline arrivals and departures. I kept my twin engines chopper out of their way and during a busy period, a controller asked me where I was.

'Look outside, I'm parked ten metres away from your windows on the north side of the tower. 'I saw a controller swivel his head and seeing us hovering just outside his air-conditioned console, he smiled and waved. No one was going to hit us without demolishing the control tower in the process. Shortly after, a jumbo began its approach to land. 'I'd heard that that airline's pilots were among the highest paid in the world.

'Can we get some close-ups of him landing?'

'Standby, I'll ask the tower for permission.' Clearance was given; the Singaporeans wanted the best photos possible, although it agitated the captain of the airliner. That skipper did not want a pesky little helicopter anywhere near him during the serious business of gently achieving one of his six or eight landings for that month. He voiced his displeasure in a very superior tone - the controller took no notice. Unless their safety was compromised, which it wasn't, the captain could not overrule the controller's clearance and tell me to go away. As the Jumbo descended I curved in toward it on a parallel flight path, on his left side so the captain could easily see us.

Just before touchdown I couldn't resist broadcasting 'Smile, you're on candid camera.' The Jumbo landed heavily and bounced - it was a rough arrival in Singapore for those visitors. When the pilot called to notify switching to the ground control frequency, his voice was laced with tension. We had not made his day but ours was terrific, the film was in the can and it was great fun exposing it.

Chapter 15

My job was rarely boring. Apart from my Chief Pilot duties, during the next few weeks I flew six different helicopter types and used the company Cessna 182 as personal transport. Not having flown many hours recently in stiff wings, I was rather concerned about having to land at the, by Papua New Guinea standards, easy one-way strip at Ambunti. Practising a few landings at Mt Hagen's 5,350 ft (1,630 M) elevation airport, to ensure I could get it right, left me feeling a little better.

My stomach was tight as I turned onto a long final approach at Ambunti. I tried to ignore the steep hill filling the windscreen at the end of the short, upsloping grass landing strip and the vertical bank dropping into the wide Sepik River just before the touchdown area. Pilots who flew into here every week could do this with one eye and one arm, I reminded myself while lowering the flaps. Relief flooded through me as my touchdown occurred just inside the markers, using less than half the strip before taxiing to the parking area.