



Family Farm to PNG Development Bank

**STORY OF A
DIDIMAN**

**MURROUGH
BENSON**

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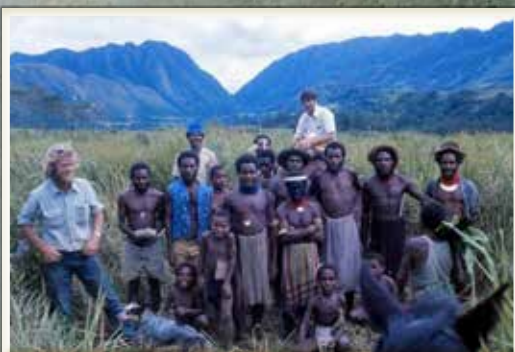


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1: The Story Begins

Papua New Guinea was my home from February 1966 until September 1977, initially as a didiman (agricultural officer) and then with the PNG Development Bank as a rural officer.

In the latter part of 1965, when I was nearing the end of my three-year Diploma of Agriculture course at Dookie Agricultural College in north-eastern Victoria, I started casting the net around for a job once I graduated. One application was for a position as an agricultural officer with the Australian Administration in the then Territory of Papua and New Guinea (TPNG). In due course, along with a number of my colleagues, I went to Melbourne for an interview with the Department of Territories.

Some three months later, though, as my time at Dookie drew to a close, I still had heard nothing from them, so I returned to the family dairy farm in western Victoria. While I thoroughly enjoyed life on the farm, it was never a realistic option for me to carve out a career there. We never wanted for much growing up, but a milking herd of seventy or eighty cows would not have sustained a grown family—and potential new family members in the future. So, within a week of my returning from Dookie I was back in Melbourne in search of a job.

Ten days later I had a phone call from the Department of Education offering me a position as a maths and science teacher at Derrinallum High School, a little over an hour away from our farm. So, what teacher training did I have? Absolutely none! In those days a qualification such as my Diploma of Agriculture was sufficient. I accepted the teaching job straight away and the next day was off to see the headmaster and arrange accommodation in town.

When I arrived home that evening, lo and behold, after three months of silence, there was a letter from the Department of Territories saying that I had been accepted as an agricultural officer in TPNG. Not only had I been accepted, but I was given a starting date of 21 February 1966, just seventeen days away! Having been brought up to honour my commitments, my immediate response was to say I would stick with the teaching job to which I had already agreed, and which I was due to start in three days' time.

My father pointed out that I owed the Department of Education nothing, and argued that the TPNG opportunity was too good to pass up. Interestingly, Dad's diary shows that the headmaster supported this view. How right they proved to be! I 'did the right thing', though, and fronted up at the school on Monday morning, was duly introduced at assembly and muddled my way through a number of classes.

Meanwhile, at the headmaster's suggestion, my father negotiated my release with the department from the normal requirement of one month's notice of intention to quit. Dad could mount a very persuasive argument and, indeed, used to revel in taking on the authorities. So, helped by the fact that I had yet to sign formal acceptance of the position, by the end of day two of my teaching career I was free to go. I never did get paid for those two days of teaching! Clearly, not only did I owe the department nothing but the feeling was reciprocated.

Nothing heard for three months and then two and a half weeks to get myself to a new country, a largely alien new job and ready to hit the ground running. I was soon to learn, though, that this was how the world generally operated.

In reality, though, two and a half weeks was ample time; after all, I had very few worldly possessions, my commitments were even fewer and my bank balance was hardly a burden to bear—just one shilling left in my Commonwealth Savings Bank passbook (I still have the passbook to prove it).

So, having enough time to get myself ready was never an issue—

and that included being formally released from my National Service obligations, which were due to be decided at the next ballot in March. I learned almost four years later, just after I was married, that my marble was in fact drawn at that ballot, but I'll come back to this later in my story.

So, on the evening of 20 February 1966, I flew out of Melbourne headed for Port Moresby—on an Ansett-ANA Douglas DC-6B aircraft I think it was. Early the next morning, after a flight of nine and a half hours or so, we touched down at Jacksons Airport. After the initial blast of tropical humidity as we walked across the tarmac to the tin shed that served as the terminal, I was met by a local driver. He dropped me off at Burnley Court Guesthouse in Boroko, where I managed to grab a few much-needed hours of sleep.

After lunch I was picked up again and whisked off to DASf (Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries) Headquarters at Konedobu. I found my posting was to be Okapa in the Eastern Highlands, some sixty-two miles south-east of Goroka and, so they told me, three hours by road. I liked the idea of the temperate Highlands' climate after just a few hours in 'sticky' Moresby. After getting on the payroll (it's interesting how these pressing issues stick in one's mind after fifty years) I was booked on a flight to Goroka the following morning. So ended my formal induction as a didiman!

An early start the next day saw my introduction to the wonderful old DC-3 aircraft and, after a brief stopover in Lae, I was in Goroka by mid-morning. I booked into my temporary accommodation at the Goroka Hotel and then fronted up at the DASf office alongside the airstrip. Then I was introduced to my first job, overseeing the harvesting and curing of tobacco leaf on the DASf experimental plot alongside the Asaro River just outside town. These trials were the forerunner of smallholder tobacco plots that proved quite successful in the Goroka area over the next few years—in co-operation with the tobacco giants Rothmans and WD & HO Wills.

I was still a couple of months short of my twentieth birthday,



TOP: Moving camp—from
up in the clouds

LEFT: With pyrethrum
planters, May 1966

RIGHT: Fortunately, patrol
carriers were very sure
footed



and relished being thrown in the deep end, and being largely left to manage my own affairs. The nature of the job I had been given also meant that I had the use of a Land Rover over the weekend, which was quite a bonus, not that it was used for other than work but it did add to the freedom I enjoyed right from the start. I was to find that this freedom was a feature of many jobs in PNG—and one that equipped you to cope with most things later on in life, even if it led to some frustration when exposed to more restrictive hierarchical structures when working back in Australia years later—perhaps that is what is meant by ‘culture shock’.

In between my tobacco responsibilities I was acquainted with budget estimates and other necessary paperwork, while doing my best to pick up enough *Tok Pisin* (Pidgin English) to be able to converse reasonably freely with the locals. I was also introduced to the key elements of coffee production, as well as the fairly new pyrethrum that was being introduced to areas at higher altitude where coffee didn’t fare so well. That, however, was about the extent to which a didiman was exposed to any orientation or training specific to the job at hand. Clearly, there was an expectation that the broad training we had received before arriving in the country, together with on-the-job training, was adequate and, by and large, I don’t think many of us let down the ‘powers that be’.

About three weeks after I arrived in Goroka, it was decided that Okapa would be better suited to someone with a little more experience than me. Instead, I would now be going to Kundiawa, the administrative centre for the Chimbu District, a few hours’ drive to the west of Goroka but only fifteen minutes flying time away. Three days later I was there, having had my first taste of flying in a Cessna 206 along valleys with mountains towering above. Another eye opener on that flight was the nature of the cargo—in the cabin behind me was a small trussed-up pig and a number of chickens in a *pitpit* (wild sugar cane) cage. While these experiences were a fascinating introduction to flying in the

Highlands, it was not long before I became quite blasé about them—it became quite normal.

The plan was that I would spend at least six months based in Kundiawa. As it turned out, six months became less than three and then I was posted to Gumine. Clearly, I was by then considered sufficiently experienced to take on responsibility for managing my own sub-district. In Kundiawa, I shared a house just up the hill from the club with three kiaps (patrol officers) as well as a collection of snakes that one of them had, fortunately, well contained (to the best of my knowledge). The club was the social hub of the town and the fact that, more than fifty years later, I have stronger memories of it than I have of the house I lived in perhaps tells us something.

My first month and a bit in Kundiawa was spent being introduced to a range of agricultural pursuits in the area: native cattle projects (fencing and yards, pasture establishment, management and basic veterinary services), coffee (maintenance, harvesting and processing), pyrethrum (production, harvesting, processing and buying), tree seedling distribution and identifying and preparing some village families for their move onto land settlement blocks at Kindeng in the neighbouring Western Highlands. With a big population in a relatively small area, there was a lot of pressure on land in Chimbu so resettlement of some families was seen as one way of addressing this issue.

The remainder of my time based at Kundiawa was spent mostly on patrol promoting the expansion of pyrethrum production, largely in the Kup Census District to the south-west of the town and extending around into the Kerowagi Sub-District. With the official opening of Stafford Allen's pyrethrum extraction plant just outside Mt Hagen on 16 May 1966, there was a renewed push to lift the production of pyrethrum, a daisy-like flower from which the active ingredient of a widely used non-toxic insecticide is extracted. Pyrethrum had been introduced a few years earlier as a cash crop in areas mostly above an altitude of about 7,000 feet, where coffee could not be grown successfully.

Another newcomer, who had come to the Territory as a didiman a few weeks after me, joined me on the patrol. We worked with the local villagers helping them replant existing gardens and extend their plantings wherever they were keen to do so. As one area was completed, we moved on to the next area, establishing our camp either in an established *haus kiap* (rest house), village hut or, in some cases, under our own tarpaulin. Canvas bed sleeves rigged up on bush poles formed our beds and were quite comfortable with our sleeping bags to protect us from the cold. Lighting was provided by kerosene pressure lanterns.

Camped above 8,000 feet usually gave us spectacular views over the clouds in the valley below early in the morning. It did, however, present challenges in finding any dry firewood nearby for cooking and keeping us warm into the evening—and it could get pretty chilly. Our *manki masta* (domestic servant) saw to it, though, that we were always well supplied with dry firewood bought from villagers lower down the mountains, as well as putting together all our meals. On patrol, the local people always supplied us with plenty of lovely fresh fruit and vegetables, and we supplemented this with a variety of tinned food that we brought with us. Most of our gear was carried from camp to camp in large metal patrol boxes, slung on a sapling and carried by two men who we would engage for the job at the start of the trek.

During this time on patrol we were fortunate to be given a short break to go to our first Goroka Show, a spectacular event that drew thousands of people from throughout the Highlands in particular.



TOP: Buying pyrethrum
west of Gumine



LEFT: DASF office and
store at Gumine, July 1966



RIGHT: Kuri and his son at
my Gumine house, 1966

2: Gumine, Chimbu District

In mid-June 1966 I was posted to Gumine, about thirty miles south of Kundiawa and a couple of hours' drive—on a good day that is, with no rain, no landslips, no breakdowns (luckily, Land Rovers were generally pretty reliable) and no punctures—a combination not often enjoyed. The limestone-paved roads (where they were paved at all) were pretty harsh on tyres so we always carried a repair kit with plenty of vulcaniser patches. Another hazard on the road was pigs, and it was a good idea to avoid hitting one, as the usual response of the owners if you didn't stop was to remove the decking of a bridge further down the road to halt your progress while compensation was negotiated.

Fortunately, I managed to avoid hitting any pigs in my time in Chimbu, although I did once hit one on the Highlands Highway in the Western Highlands. I was lucky to avoid any confrontation with the local people on this occasion though as there was no one nearby at the time and the big wide road allowed me to get well away from the scene before the dead pig was found.

Apart from access by road, Gumine was also serviced by Omkalai airstrip, renowned for its thirteen per cent slope up the ridge out of which it had been carved; it was said to be the steepest constant grade of any airstrip in the Southern Hemisphere. It was about seven miles from Gumine by road, but only about two miles if you took the tough one-hour walk across the big gorge between the station and the airstrip.

This route became quite familiar to me as the Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries (DASF) extension centre was

alongside the airstrip, and transport was often not available to make the trip on wheels. Departing planes would disappear off the end of the strip, down over the Wahgi River far below, before circling to regain height and going on their way.

Coming in to land presented another challenge: making sure the plane maintained enough momentum to reach the level parking bay at the top. More than one pilot not familiar with the strip found themselves stranded part way up and had to call on local manpower to help them complete their journey by giving the plane a push. A government air charter plane serviced Omkalai three times a week from Goroka, bringing in our supplies and mail, so we were by no means isolated. If we flew to Goroka it only took about fifteen minutes and Kundiawa was barely seven minutes away.

Apart from physically visiting other centres, communication with the outside world was by means of letters, telegrams or the twice-daily scheduled two-way radio hook up (known as the 'sked'). The 'sked' was used mostly to communicate with people within Chimbu. Most people also had a good shortwave radio to keep in touch with world news, sporting events and so on.

Gumine was a pretty little station at an altitude of 5,600 feet with a wonderful temperate climate—warm days and at least two-blanket nights. Annual rainfall was about 90–95 inches, mostly falling from November to March. Mosquitoes were practically nonexistent and I rarely saw a snake there, which I was very happy about. The station serviced a population of about 38,000 people. During my time there it was home to seven expatriates—the Assistant District Commissioner (ADC) and his wife, a patrol officer, cadet patrol officer, a primary school teacher, doctor and myself.

Initially, I shared a permanent materials house with one of the kiaps, but after a few months I chose to make way for a newly-arrived *liklik kiap* (cadet patrol officer) and moved into a little place of my own. It was a single-bedroom house with corrugated iron roof, woven *pitpit* walls and pit-sawn timber floor—basic but very comfortable. I had my own *mangki masta*, Kuri, who bought all

the vegetables and fruit at the weekly market on the station—never any shortage of lovely fresh local produce—and did all my cooking and cleaning. Kuri also came on patrol with me and looked after all the domestic arrangements while I was out working during the day. Sometimes his wife and children would help with the chores, too.

Regular meals or parties in each other's homes were our main social outlet and other recreation took the form of tennis, table tennis, football and swimming. The occasional weekend or few days away on business or pleasure at one of the bigger centres provided a bit of variety. One of those jaunts not long after I went to Gumine was to shear some sheep near Goroka for a woman who taught the local people how to spin and weave wool and other materials. I met up with the fellow who was with me on my first patrol outside Kundiawa and it took us most of a day to shear thirty or forty sheep with extremely long and greasy wool. We also marked a few lambs while we were there.

The DASF office when I first went to Gumine was an eight-foot square *kunai* (tough, long-bladed grass) hut with woven *pitpit* walls and a dirt floor. It was clearly designed for people much shorter than my six foot two frame—but it didn't really matter for I didn't intend spending a lot of time there. The rats obviously enjoyed the meagre stationery supplies, but I'm not sure that the recipients of my monthly reports were particularly impressed with the quality of what I sent them—and that's before they even got to read the content. I suspect my explanations may have fallen on deaf ears, too; a bit like some of those excuses teachers get from students who have not done their homework.

A visit by one of the DASF 'big wigs' from Moresby, after I had been at Gumine for only a couple of weeks, hastened the funding of a new office; it's probably an understatement to say he was not particularly impressed with our *kunai* hut. Nothing like getting them out in the real world to get a bit of action—not that I was particularly concerned about action on that front at the time, but the presence of both the regional and district agricultural officers at the

time probably added some weight to the argument for an upgrade. Our new office, complete with concrete floor, corrugated iron roof and woven *pitpit* walls was ready for use early in 1967.

The local DASF staff with me consisted of a very capable assistant agricultural officer, who had done a two-year course at PATI (Popondetta Agricultural Training Institute), an agricultural assistant who can perhaps be best described as a *bosboi* (foreman), again very capable in that role, and nine farmer trainees who stayed with us for up to twelve months, and learned by helping us with our work in the field. The idea was that they would then return to their villages and help spread the word around. How effective this trickle-down approach was, however, is debatable. I suspect many of these young men drifted into town rather than return to their home places.

3. Gumine—Focus on Pyrethrum

My main focus at Gumine was to increase the production of pyrethrum, following the process used on my initial patrol out of Kundiawa. We would go from garden to garden, spending perhaps half to three-quarters of an hour with each grower showing them what to do and seeing that they did it correctly. This would go on for four or five days in different areas then we would return to the original group to see how they were going. The women and old men were generally the most reliable when it came to sticking at the task, the younger men having a tendency to get diverted more readily. The pyrethrum-growing areas were in pretty rugged country; it was not unusual to spend two or three hours walking between villages and go up or down a couple of thousand feet in the process. Needless to say, anyone working in this area got pretty fit very quickly.

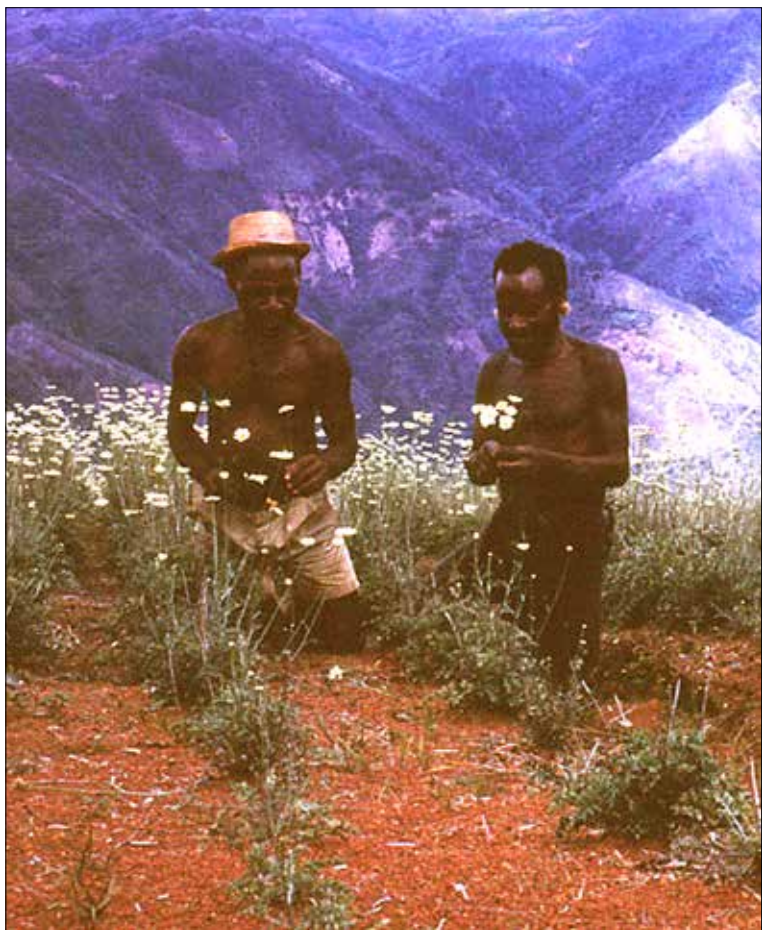
The purpose of introducing pyrethrum was to provide a cash crop in areas where coffee could not be grown successfully. We used to buy the dried flowers on the roadside once a week and then bale it up (200 lb bales) for transport to the extraction plant in Mt Hagen. From time to time neither of the two short wheelbase Land Rovers or Massey Ferguson 135 tractor and trailer on the station was available so I would have to jump on the station motorbike (a Honda 90) and travel the twelve miles west of the station to where most of the pyrethrum was grown to let the growers know that we would not be able to buy *plaua* (flower) today. This trip was fine in dry weather but could be quite challenging—in fact nigh on impossible—after heavy rain but we always tried to get the message out as early as possible as many of the growers had to walk quite long distances



TOP: Occupational hazard
on the 'pyrethrum push' at
Kamaga (between
Mt Hagen and Tambul),
June 1967

LEFT: A load of pyrethrum,
big but not very heavy

RIGHT: Pyrethrum ready for
harvesting in Gumine area



to the buying points. If we were early enough, we could save them quite a walk as someone was always available to *bikmaus* (shout) the message. Growers who lived beyond the nearest valley had to rely on the message being relayed from ridge top to ridge top. The road east of the station went for about twenty miles before we had to resort to walking, but the altitude here was generally lower than to the west so not much pyrethrum was grown, although there was plenty of other work to do in this direction.

The financial rewards for pyrethrum growers were not great: the price at the time was fifteen cents for one pound of dried flowers and it took about 3,000 flower heads to produce this amount, hardly a great reward for effort. In most cases, though, the growers did not have much in the way of alternative sources of cash income. The local people were, however, well aware of what coffee growers could get for their produce and there was always someone ready to point out the relative returns for a given volume of both crops. At twenty cents a pound, coffee was obviously somewhat more attractive but it was volume, not weight, that these people used as their criterion for comparison and there was a huge difference in what they would get for a bag of very light dried pyrethrum flowers and the much heavier same bag of coffee parchment beans. Trying to explain the discrepancy was always an interesting challenge—and not one in which we always succeeded.

Coffee had been introduced some years earlier and had proved to be quite successful. In the Gumine Sub-District alone, for example, seventy-five tons of parchment coffee had been bought by the local cooperative, the Kundiawa Coffee Society, in 1965–66. By the mid-1960s, however, coffee was in over-supply on international markets and export quotas had been imposed on producing nations under the World Coffee Agreement. As a result, Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries (DASF) field staff were instructed not to encourage further plantings, although they were still expanding. Having encouraged growth of the industry just a few years earlier, though, we could hardly turn around now and not support what



TOP: The Gumine fish pond, cleaned and refilled

LEFT: Keeping up appearances on patrol

RIGHT: Kalabus (prisoners) cleaning the Gumine fish pond



was already there. So, we did help coffee growers with basic crop husbandry such as instruction in pruning and shade management. It was interesting trying to communicate the benefits of pruning; how could less foliage possibly produce more coffee? We also helped out with how to process the freshly picked coffee berries more effectively—pulping the berries, including helping with the purchase and setting up of hand pulpers, fermenting and drying.

As was the case throughout the Chimbu District, the most heavily populated region of the country, land was at a premium in the Gumine area but cattle projects were still popular. A group would generally pool its resources and once they had sorted out amongst themselves the issue of usage of the land we would help them buy the necessary fencing materials, assist with putting up the fences and yards, planting some improved pasture species (Elephant Grass and *Setaria*) and stocking the project with a few head of cattle. Providing basic veterinary services was also part of the support we provided.

Chickens were also very popular so we sold these to the villagers whenever we could. The supply was never enough to meet demand though so after a while we started to breed some of our own on our newly acquired *banis didiman* (the ten-acre DASF block alongside Omkalai airstrip). Another bit of protein in the traditional low-protein diet of the locals, although rather than it being a regular dietary supplement consumption tended to be limited largely to sing-sings (ceremonial gatherings) when cattle also fell victim to the ‘butcher’.

We also stocked the station ponds with golden carp and as these bred up were able to distribute some fish to the local villagers. They were in great demand, largely for ornamental purposes but our hope was that they could in time provide a further boost to the protein intake of the locals, notwithstanding the fact that carp taste like mud.

Inevitably, a certain amount of office work had to be undertaken but it was not an onerous chore. A daily *Field Officer’s Journal* (FOJ) had to be submitted at the end of each month, half a day a month usually saw the general monthly report completed and a monthly

financial return usually took less than an hour. In addition, records of all pyrethrum purchased had to be maintained as well as attending to the usual correspondence. Quarterly work plans and budgets also had to be prepared.

While at Gumine in mid-1967 I was seconded for about seven weeks onto a major pyrethrum 'push' in the Western and Southern Highlands. Additional DASF staff were brought into the area to give production a big kick along. Unlike the rugged Chimbu District that I was used to, the area that I was given between Mt Hagen and Tambul had some fairly extensive areas of relatively flat land and I was given responsibility for trialling mechanised preparation of the ground for planting. I believe this was the first, and perhaps only, time this approach had been used. Whereas I had previously worked on plots as small as one-tenth of an acre, often on the sides of hillsides, now I was dealing with five or six acres at a time with a tractor and plough. Progress was certainly faster and a lot of acres were planted up to pyrethrum in my time there but there was also a lot of downtime with the tractor often getting bogged in the heavy, damp black soil. A crawler tractor may have been a better option in the circumstances.

By the end of November 1967, I had completed my first term of twenty-one months and it was time to head off on three-months' leave. A posting back to Kundiawa awaited me on my return so I packed up my worldly possessions, now vastly expanded to include a dinner set (Royal Doulton no less, which I seem to recall was all that was available at the Buntings store in Goroka at the time), basic cutlery, pots and pans and a record player with a selection of records. Surely, I was becoming quite a 'catch'—but that's another story!

4: Kundiawa, Chimbu District

February 1968 saw me back in Kundiawa, administrative centre of the Chimbu District, after my first leave of three months. I actually returned about a week earlier than originally planned, constrained by a broken wrist in plaster and seeking relief from heatwave conditions in Victoria. Having run out of money was a contributing factor too! I had even had to resort to selling my prized short-wave radio to cover the budget.

The house I shared in Kundiawa was located directly across the road from the Chimbu Club, renowned for the annual Chimbu Ball, a rollicking weekend-long annual event that drew people from near and far. At other times there was a succession of events, including regular movie screening, that provided plenty of social outlet. Also very strategically located, next door was *haus sista* where four nursing sisters lived. Two of them worked in the hospital caring for the multitude of medical conditions that came their way, and the other two spent much of their time on the road conducting maternal and child health clinics in the villages of the district.

Houseboys did a wonderful job looking after the various household chores, sometimes in rather trying circumstances. I recall one particular dinner offering at my place that didn't reflect particularly well on the attention of us two bachelors to keeping the pantry and fridge well stocked: nothing but a piece of grilled tripe in the middle of the dinner plate. Message received loud and clear!

The houseboys had their fun, too. Mekeso, who worked for me and my housemate, and Edward, who looked after *haus sista*, liked to play cards (*ple laki*), which just happened to be illegal. The venue was usually



TOP: Haus Didiman at Kundiawa

LEFT: The Gembogl Road

RIGHT: Plenty of manpower for road and bridge repairs

BOTTOM: Kundiawa, 1968



Edward's house and, from time to time, they were raided by the police and finished up in the lock-up for the night. Usually someone would be alerted to their absence in the morning when Edward's wife, Maria, was asked where the breakfast was at *haus sista*. Someone would then go and bail out the miscreants and normal life would resume—until the next time!

As well as being obliged to patronise the local club, it also seemed that one should do the right thing and get to know one's neighbours. It was therefore not unusual to gravitate to *haus sista*. The social scene was therefore pretty much set for the next two years. One of the 'girls next door' made a particularly strong impression on me, and Joy and I were married in Townsville, Queensland in November 1969.

Previously, I outlined the range of activities that kept a *didiman* busy around Kundiawa so I won't repeat them here. One interesting diversion was a cattle disease eradication campaign. This program involved accompanying a vet in a helicopter to visit all the cattle projects in the area and test the animals that the owners had been asked to contain in their yards beforehand. Needless to say, this was a far quicker way of covering the territory than the usual many hours, even days, of walking.

For a time, I also had to cover at Gembogl for a colleague who was on leave, and who was then transferred to the fledgling oil palm development in West New Britain. Gembogl was about thirty miles north of Kundiawa, an 'interesting' two-hour drive—on a good day, that is, without punctures, breakdowns, bridge repairs or landslips. In wet weather it was sometimes necessary to call on some local manpower to help you up the steeper sections. Manpower was never an issue in that quite densely populated area and a few sticks of twist tobacco or a bit of salt was usually all that was required in payment, cash being of limited use to many of the people.

The main task at Gembogl was to look after the regular buying of pyrethrum. Being at a considerably higher altitude than the rest of Chimbu District, the Gembogl Sub-District produced much more pyrethrum than elsewhere. The country was particularly rugged, lying



TOP & RIGHT: The new DASF building at Kundiawa, before and after the fire

LEFT: Keglsugl airstrip—stepping off point for Mt Wilhelm climb

BOTTOM: Spectacular views a reward for effort at the halfway point on Mt Wilhelm



in the foothills of PNG's highest peak, Mt Wilhelm (14,793 feet), and 'eye-level gardening' was pretty much the norm; flat land was certainly at a premium.

Along with a British medical student friend, Joy and I attempted to climb Mt Wilhelm in 1969. Setting off from Keglsugl airstrip, at an altitude of 8,300 feet, on the first day we walked as far as one of the lakes. The view from the hut where we spent the night was spectacular, looking across the lake to the rugged mountain beyond. There was not a cloud in the sky but the altitude of 11,000 feet or more meant it was fairly brisk and attempts to dry our saturated boots and socks largely failed. Trying to get a fire going in the thinner atmosphere was also a challenge, not helped by the lack of dry kindling and wood.

Undaunted, we set off again in the morning, walking through the soggy surrounds of the lake and across numerous icy small streams. After a couple of hours, Joy and I decided to call it a day, reasoning that our time could be better spent trying to organise a bit of a meal and a nice warm cup of coffee for our friend when he returned from his trek to the top. I don't recall how successful we were in our efforts, but our friend did get to the peak and back safely, albeit not without some scary moments of disorientation in the rarefied atmosphere near the top. He readily acknowledged, later, that walking up by himself was not the most sensible thing to do, but he did have the satisfaction of reaching the top. We were a little disappointed not to be able to make it all the way up, but it was nevertheless a great experience.

Shortly after I arrived in Kundiawa a new DASF office was built just down the road from the District Office. In not much more than a year, however, the office burnt down. My housemate woke me early one morning and, pointing across the valley towards the town centre, asked if the flames on the ridge were coming from my office. They were! So it was back to square one on the office front, not that I ever spent a great deal of time there. My main regret was that my tyre levers had been lost in the blaze; you could get by without an office, but no tyre levers on the Chimbu roads could be much more of an inconvenience.

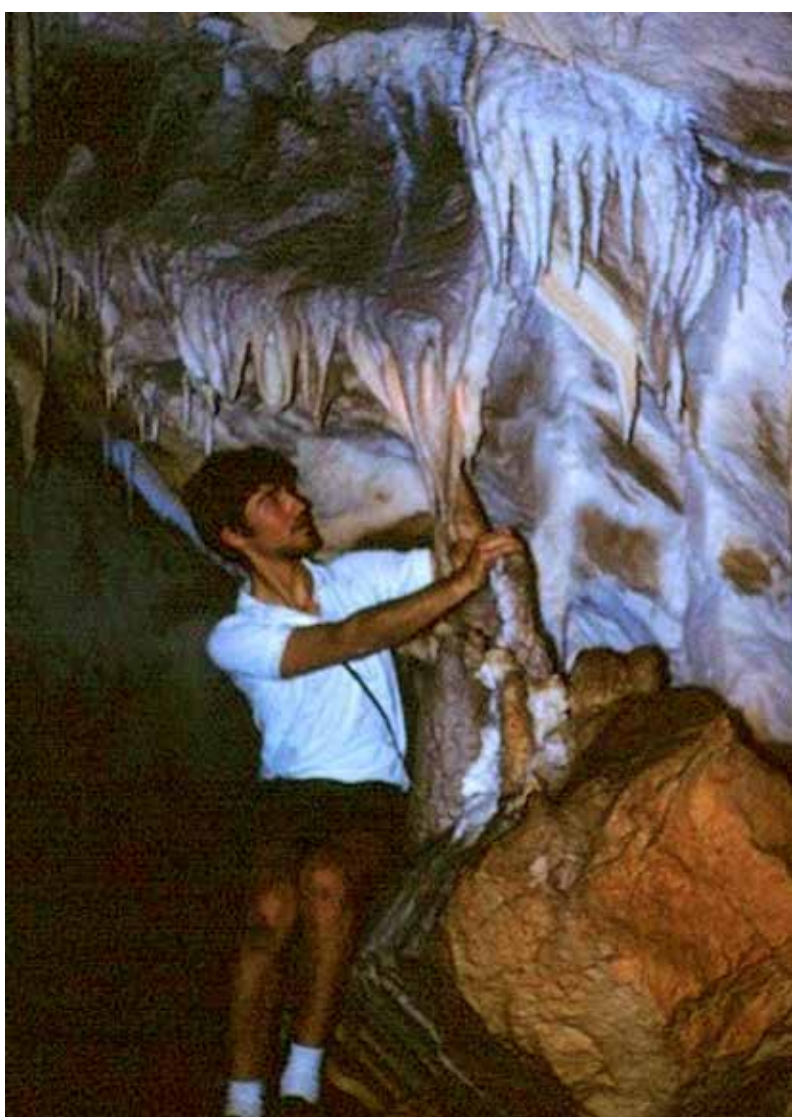
Everyone worked hard but that didn't stop us having a lot of fun as



TOP: Kundiawa hospital staff stranded in the Markham Valley

LEFT: Markham Valley—a long way from Lae, but two doctors keeping the vehicle mobile

RIGHT: Exploring the Chimbu caves



well. Apart from our trek up Mt Wilhelm—and, yes, with the benefit of hindsight that does qualify as ‘fun’—a couple of times a group of us chartered the locally-based TAL Cessna 206 for a weekend of R&R at Madang. It was only about a half-hour flight from Kundiawa but what a wonderful place and a whole world away from our Highland home.

Another trip saw seven or eight of us pack into a ute hired from a local mission and drive down to Lae for the weekend; at least that was the intention. Breaking down in the middle of the Markham Valley on our way home and me having to hitch a ride back to Lae for parts put paid to any ideas we had of getting back in time for work on Monday. To put it mildly, the doctors in charge of the Kundiawa Hospital were less than impressed with having to cope with a severely depleted workforce that day, being down one doctor, one medical student and three sisters!

Closer to home, from time to time we would explore caves about half an hour out of town, slipping and sliding our way down through a *kaukau* (sweet potato) garden to reach the entrance just above the river. Further downstream, the Chimbu River, running along the bottom of *banis didiman* (the agricultural station), was also a good place to *gumi* (float on inner tubes)—as long as you avoided the raging torrent that the Chimbu could become after heavy rain.

My time in Kundiawa also saw me make a brief foray into the world of journalism. Our lounge room was home to the ‘printing press’—a borrowed Gestetner duplicating machine. With help from a number of other people, my housemate and I published a number of issues of the *Kundiawa Organ*, touching on a range of topics of local interest. Unfortunately, one article too many touched a little close to the bone and complaints from the manager of the Transport Department led to the demise of this august publication. It seems that people being offended is not a recent phenomenon!

November 1969 saw the end of my second term of twenty-one months in PNG. Three months leave started with our wedding in Townsville, followed by lots of travel up and down the east coast of Australia. Ahead of us lay a new posting in the Gulf District, just where still to be revealed to us.



TOP: Murua Station and airstrip—note thick rainforest from which station was carved

LEFT: DASF's big canoe frequently had outboard motor problems



RIGHT: Farmer trainees being allocated tasks for the day



BOTTOM: DASF office

5: Murua, Gulf District

The morning of 12 February 1970 saw Joy and me winging our way from Brisbane to Port Moresby, a three-hour trip that had us scheduled to touch down at midday.

We arrived pretty much on time, notwithstanding three attempts at landing because of the cyclonic winds that almost forced the pilot to retreat to Cairns.

At this stage, all we knew was that DASf was transferring me to the Gulf District—but where? The first bit of information I gleaned from my visit to HQ at Konedobu was that we were going to Murua.

The next day we were at the Steamships' store in town opening an account so that we could get goods sent on the 'K' boat that went to Murua once a month as well as buying a few basics to keep us going in the meantime. We could, after all, stock up more fully at Kerema ... couldn't we? We were soon to find the answer ... if you were not in Kerema when the boat arrived from Moresby you missed out!

We found there was a flight going to Murua that afternoon, so at 4.40 we were on our way, arriving about an hour later. There was no time to see too much of the house on that first day—just enough to find that there was a lot of cleaning to do and that even the most basic of furniture was missing. And so ended Friday, 13 February 1970.

Murua was an agricultural training station some eight km as the crow flies north east of Kerema, the Gulf District Headquarters. Across the Murua River from the station was a small land settlement scheme of about forty blocks that produced rubber. There was no road access from the coast and no regular plane service so it was generally a boat trip across Kerema Bay and up one of the many inlets along that



TOP: Settler's house on the rubber blocks—the rubber factory is beyond the house



LEFT: Settler processing latex from his rubber trees

RIGHT: Rolling latex sheets in smallholder rubber factory



BOTTOM: Settlers with rubber sheets for sale at the DASf station

coast. This trip took about three-quarters of an hour by dinghy but could take twice that time in the big canoe that was needed to carry drums of fuel and other large items—44-gallon drums of fuel fitted across the canoe.

The normal arrival point was the wharf at Matupe from where it was about a five-minute drive on a well-formed road that had been built up through the low-lying tropical jungle.

Development of Murua Station started in 1959 when DASF personnel tackled the virgin forest with nothing more than axes and machetes. Later, a chainsaw speeded up progress somewhat. Nevertheless, it was hot, sweaty, painstaking work in an environment of consistently high humidity.

Eleven years on, significant progress had been made: a good, solid airstrip running up the middle of the station; housing for staff across a range of departments; dormitory-style accommodation and kitchen/dining facilities for the farmer trainees; generator-powered electricity; rubber buying and storage facilities; a small store run by a club that had been set up by local staff to cater for the basic needs of people on the station as well as those living on the nearby rubber settlement blocks; and a small office.

A couple of cleared and fenced paddocks were home to three donkeys, two horses and a few cattle. A set of yards had been built in one of the paddocks. Across the river, next to the rubber blocks, was a primary school that catered for the children of both block owners and station workers.

Staff consisted of the DASF office clerk, three agricultural assistants, two carpenters, a tractor driver, car (Toyota LandCruiser) driver, the power boy (who was responsible for starting up the station generator each morning and evening and looking after its general maintenance) and a policeman.

A variety of crops had been planted. These were of both an experimental nature, to help determine what may be worthwhile pursuing on a commercial basis by the local landholders, as well as providing a training ground for farmer trainees who spent about

twelve months on the station learning the different aspects of crop husbandry, particularly rubber. In addition to fairly substantial plantings of rubber of varying ages, there was Robusta coffee, nutmeg, vanilla, an oil palm plot and quite a few custard apple trees scattered around the place.

A considerable area of the blocks had been planted to rubber trees and much of it was already in production. The settlers 'tapped' the latex each morning, allowing the white sap to flow into aluminium cups attached to the tree. Later, the latex was collected and taken to the small processing factory that each settler had on their block where it was put in trays with formic acid to coagulate it. The settlers processed their rubber to the Ribbed Smoked Sheet (RSS) stage, the coagulated latex being rolled into fairly thin sheets and smoked before being brought across to the station where DASF staff graded, weighed and bought it before packing it into 100 lb bales, which were then shipped on the monthly 'K' boat to Steamships in Moresby.

My work as a Rural Development Officer (RDO) at Murua was pretty varied. In the absence of any other government departments being represented by an expatriate on the station, in addition to looking after the DASF staff I had to provide day-to-day support to the local officers working for Public Works, Education, Transport, Police and the Electricity Commission. I also had responsibility for the rural development work of a small team of DASF people stationed at Ihu, a little way up the Vailala River about fifty km around the coast west of Kerema, and made regular trips there by plane from Kerema.

A large part of my time was spent attending to the needs of the settlers on the nearby rubber blocks. Apart from assisting them with expansion of their plantings using seedlings from our rubber nursery, we had to ensure that all aspects of maintenance were attended to, that tapping of the older trees was done properly and consistently and that curing and smoking of the latex was done properly.

My exposure to rural credit in PNG started when I was posted to Murua. Development of the smallholder rubber blocks from virgin bush through to production would not have been possible

without funding from the PNG Development Bank and, as was the case throughout the country, the effective disbursement of funds and subsequent repayment of loans relied very heavily on the local didiman, acting as the Bank's agent.

Under the loans, settlers were paid a living allowance until their rubber production could support them. Drawing on the loan funds, we also organised the purchase of building materials for dwellings, rubber factories and smoke houses as well as tools and rubber processing equipment. The local officers' staff club, under the guidance of the didiman in charge at the time, had set up a small store on the station to service the basic needs of people living on and around it. Tools and equipment such as tapping knives, latex cups, coagulation trays, formic acid and rubber rollers as well as cover crop seed were ordered through the club from Burns Philp and Steamships in Port Moresby and shipped out on the monthly 'K' boat. Seedlings from the station rubber nursery were supplied to the settlers as they developed their blocks.

Regular individual block reports were completed for the Bank, recording progress against the development plan, production details, income and expenditure. Budgets were reviewed regularly and amended as necessary with the approval of the Bank. Apart from disbursing loan funds, DASf was also responsible for ensuring lease rental payments were up to date, collecting loan repayments and communicating to settlers if any action was being considered by the Bank.

I was also the paymaster for all government employees on the station and at the school across the river. Money for the pays as well as buying the rubber was advanced to us by Treasury in Kerema, and brought up to Murua in a calico bag ... no, a locked calico bag! That was the only security on the trip up the river but it seemed to work all right! Once at Murua we had a proper safe in our office.

From time to time it was necessary to mediate in disputes between settlers, including when they sometimes came to blows. While there was a local policeman on the station, he was rarely the first point of



TOP: Farmer trainees' accommodation with trade store in foreground

LEFT: A new farmer trainee arriving at Murua

RIGHT: A fairly substantial settler's house on the rubber resettlement scheme

BOTTOM: OIC's house



call in these matters; realistically, a lone Chimbu policeman mediating between two groups of people from the Gulf was hardly likely to work.

Other tasks included arranging maintenance on all station housing, always a challenge given that PWD (Public Works Department) in Kerema rarely seemed to have much in the way of materials. The months it took to get our own house in a reasonably liveable condition was a good indication of the challenges faced—out of sight, out of mind seemed to be very much the way things were here. We suspected very strongly that a leaking roof was causing our electricity to short out, but were having great difficulty getting anyone to share our view or even to look at it; eventually, someone did come up and we were vindicated when they removed a sheet of Masonite from the lounge room ceiling, and the fellow was absolutely drenched by the water that had been trapped up there—with electric wiring sitting in it.

Our header tank, the only source of running water for the house, only held water for a very short time. Again, PWD couldn't help so we resorted to trying to plug the holes with whatever we could lay our hands on and, eventually, the problem seemed to be largely solved; at least we managed to slow the loss of water so that we could have a proper shower without one of us having to man the hand pump under the house to keep water supplied to the header tank.

Getting gas to flow through to the kitchen stove was a more intractable problem, but the solution lay hidden under a pile of rubbish. An old wood-burning stove that had long since passed its use-by date in one of the local officer's houses was found in one of the station sheds so we put the pieces together, did a few running repairs and set it up on the concrete pad under our high-set house. It served the purpose reasonably well for the remainder of our time at Murua. The one thing we had to be careful of was to finish our cooking well before darkness fell, before the hordes of huge mosquitoes that flourished in the tropical conditions carried us off.



TOP: Murua Primary School

LEFT: Charlie Fletcher cutting Murrough's hair



RIGHT: The normal mode of transport for Murua locals—DASF dinghy in foreground

BOTTOM: Donkey with dressing on badly-infected wound



6: Murua Challenges End

Acting as the local vet was another responsibility I had at Murua. With the support of Joy and her nursing experience, we managed to keep our donkeys, horses, cattle and pigs in good health.

The pigs were in fairly poor nick when we arrived. Their staple diet was pumpkins, of which there was no shortage on the station, supplemented with a little sweet potato that was bought from the locals from time to time, but clearly this didn't provide sufficient nutrition. We introduced some rice to their diet as well as fencing a few small paddocks so that the pigs had access to *Peuraria javanica*, the leguminous cover crop that grew all over the station and was used mainly to suppress weed growth in the rubber plantings.

Skin infections thrived in the wet environment. At one point a donkey had a badly infected sore the size of a dinner plate on its rump. With nothing else available to us we applied liberal amounts of an antibiotic cream that we found in the office. We then put a dressing over it—not expecting it to stay on for very long at all—and hoped for the best. Amazingly, the injured donkey proved to be far more co-operative than usual over the next few days and allowed us to catch her and change the dressing which, just as surprisingly, stayed on. Within a week she was almost totally healed.

Maintenance tasks on the station extended beyond the buildings and livestock. A range of machinery always seemed to be requiring some attention. As was the case with house repairs, help from Kerema was normally a fairly forlorn hope. Every now and again a Transport Department mechanic would find their way up the river, but mostly I had to apply my basic bush mechanic skills to

the problem—and mostly I managed to get things working again. The LandCruiser, tractor, motorbike and water pump at the river all responded to my attention at various times. Success with outboard motors was, however, more elusive.

While Murua had a good airstrip, there were no scheduled regular flights. Planes would call in on a needs basis or if the Kerema airstrip was closed, usually due to inclement weather. We therefore had to ensure that the strip was kept well maintained and that regular reports on its condition were provided to the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA). Every now and then the strip would be flooded and we had to close it and put cone-shaped markers in a cross to warn any approaching aircraft that they could not land. Keeping the markers in position was an interesting challenge in rising floodwaters; they simply floated away. On my first attempt at retrieving errant markers I wondered why the local staff just looked on from higher ground; on questioning them they alerted me to the fact that it was not uncommon in floods for crocodiles to float in from the nearby swamps!

On one occasion we had to accommodate a plane load of people overnight when the Kerema airstrip was closed. We had been at Murua for barely a month so were not all that well equipped to cater for unexpected visitors when the plane dropped in late in the afternoon.

I had been on the plane too, returning from a day trip to Ihu, so bypassing ‘town’ meant that I had not been able to stock up on the basics on my way home. Shortly after we welcomed the pilot and a couple with two children into our house we had another visitor, a missionary who had been lost in the jungle for a few days while walking out of Kuka Kuka country in the hills behind Murua.

While we were a bit light on for some of the comforts of life (beds, for example) we had plenty of floor space and some creative culinary skills on Joy’s part saw us all survive the night without incident and our visitors headed off on the plane the next morning.

We once hosted a visit by the Territory Administrator and the Executive Council and entourage. All went fairly smoothly until near the end of the event when some of the visiting party, sitting on the trayback of the station Toyota LandCruiser (their only motorised alternative was the tractor-drawn trailer), were taken in the wrong direction by the driver. They were reunited with the rest of the group a short while later—after all, there wasn't a lot of scope to get lost at Murua if you stuck to the very limited road network—but the Gulf District Commissioner (DC) accompanying the group was not particularly amused!

Later, we geared up for a visit by the '*lapun* [old] Development Bank Board of Directors' (as seen through my twenty-four-year old eyes and recorded in my diary of the time). Pivotal to the planned visit was a trip up the Murua River in our huge dugout canoe. The river was tidal so I don't recall what we were to have done if the tide was out. Near the rubber factory of one of the settlers, steps were cut into the bank so that the visitors could have easier access to see first-hand how the Bank's funds were being used; interesting to think how many directors we may have lost had we had a good downpour of rain, an almost daily occurrence in the Gulf.

Our carpenters made seats for the back of both the LandCruiser and the trailer to be towed by the tractor; no such refinements for the Administrator and his entourage a couple of months earlier! Come the day before the much-anticipated visit and, surprise, surprise, we had the mother of all downpours and the station was flooded. The visitors were planning on flying in, but the airstrip remained waterlogged and we had no option but to close it, and advise that it would be some days before it could be reopened.

Undaunted, arrangements were made for the visitors to come by boat from Kerema. We just had to make sure that whatever water craft were used were not stranded on the mud flats at Kerema at low tide. The visitors would also have to come prepared to wade out to their transport, as we always did, unless we could arrange to tie up at the wharf a bit further down the harbour.



TOP: Monthly 'K' boat
unloading at Matupe
wharf

LEFT: Murua school
children enjoying the river

RIGHT: Settlers' children



What we didn't know until I overheard a conversation, while awaiting my turn on the radio 'sked' (schedule) on the morning of the planned visit, was that the people in Moresby had been told that the Malalaua airstrip, which was to be the first leg of their visit to the Gulf that day, had been closed. They therefore decided to cancel the whole trip. In actual fact, Malalaua was not closed at all and the ADC (Assistant District Commissioner) there was not at all happy as he had about 300 people waiting to meet the Development Bank delegation.

At least he was told about the cancelled trip, albeit rather late in the piece, whereas the only reason we at Murua knew about it at all was the conversation I overheard on the radio.

Too bad about the lunch that Joy had gone to a lot of trouble to prepare for the visitors. Getting food together for visitors always presented a bit of a challenge at Murua. Our main supplies came in on the monthly 'K' boat from Moresby, so you had to plan well ahead when you sent your order in to 'Steamies'. In between times we had to rely on the small store in Kerema; however, fresh supplies arriving there were swooped on by those living nearby and by the time we got into town the cupboard was invariably fairly bare.

While I learned a lot at Murua, and hopefully made a useful contribution, from very early in our time there I started casting the net around for a job at a place where Joy and I could both work. In early July a replacement for me arrived at Murua. I had no idea what DASf had in mind for me although a move to Ihu was rumoured. It was to be another seven weeks before I received any formal notification from DASf—I was indeed to transfer to Ihu so packing started. Just days later, I was offered a role as a rural officer with the Development Bank, based in Port Moresby, so I immediately applied for a secondment from DASf.

I heard nothing of my application for some time so went ahead and made arrangements to move ourselves to Port Moresby. Late in the day before our departure from Murua, a telegram was received from DASf Headquarters advising that my secondment had not yet

been finalised and that I was not to leave my posting 'under any circumstances'.

I had already handed over to my replacement, our cargo had just been loaded onto the boat bound for Moresby and I was keen to start my new role. The HQ directive was therefore duly ignored and so began a wonderfully rewarding seven years with the PNG Development Bank that opened up opportunities for us both that certainly would not have presented themselves at Murua.

7: New Horizons— PNG Development Bank

On 24 September 1970 we made our last canoe trip from Murua to Kerema from where we flew to Port Moresby. I started the next day as a rural officer with the Papua and New Guinea Development Bank.

The Development Bank had opened in 1967 in response to a key recommendation of a report by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (commonly known as the World Bank) commissioned by the Australian Government. Its principal objective was ‘the promotion of the economic advancement of the indigenous population.’¹

While the Bank’s charter extended to commercial and industrial lending, and indeed these sectors together accounted for almost 69% (49.5 million Kina) of the value of loans advanced in the first ten years of the Bank’s operation, lending for agricultural purposes was very significant. In that period, loans for agriculture totalled more than 22.4 million Kina advanced to 10,246 borrowers of whom 9,966 were PNG nationals who borrowed almost 15 million Kina. Cattle accounted for 45% of the value of agricultural loans to PNG nationals, followed by oil palm with 22% of the total.

A group of agricultural specialists formed the Bank’s Rural Department—a small number of expatriates with practical experience in the field along with some recent PNG graduates of Vudal Agricultural College. Vudal had been established near Rabaul in East New Britain in 1965 to provide agricultural training for

PNG nationals, so it was not much older than the Bank, and some of its first graduates were amongst the Bank's early staff. Almost all the expatriate rural officers had served as field officers with the Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries (DASF) and some also brought with them the experience of having worked on private plantations.

A key role of the Rural Department was to undertake field inspections of mostly large-scale rural enterprises and assess their past performance and future prospects, from both a technical and financial perspective. Both new lending requests and regular reviews of existing facilities were assessed in this way. These assessments formed critical input to the lending decisions made by the Bank's loans staff. The great majority of larger-scale businesses were expatriate-owned although this did start to change slowly over the years as local operators took over some of the properties or set up their own operations.

Another important role of the Rural Department was to review many of the loan submissions for smaller enterprises that had been submitted by the Bank's agents, primarily DASF field staff, through our branches or representative offices throughout the country. While most of this work, which was quite considerable, took the form of in-office assessments, from time to time the nature of the proposal warranted a more detailed field inspection.

Training of the Vudal graduates was important to the future of the Bank's operations, so they were closely involved in all aspects of the work done, including undertaking field assessments either in company with the more experienced expatriate rural officers or on their own. In addition to this extensive on-the-job training, they were set specific tasks to deepen their evaluation skills. Over time, and as their skill level developed, a number of these graduates were posted to the Bank's branches in Boroko, Lae, Rabaul and Mt Hagen to support the lending staff there.

My initial role with the Development Bank was Rural Officer, Property Management and Land Subdivision. The purpose of the

role as originally envisaged was to come up with means of, ultimately, disposing, in a productive way, of rural properties that had come into the Bank's possession as mortgagee. The great majority of these were plantations that had been developed under the old Ex-Servicemen's Credit Scheme (ESCS), the assets and liabilities of which the Bank took over from the Ex-Servicemen's Credit Board on 1 January 1969. Under this transfer of management responsibilities a total of 244 loans, around half of which were to Papua New Guineans, with a total debt approaching \$7 million came under the control of the Bank.

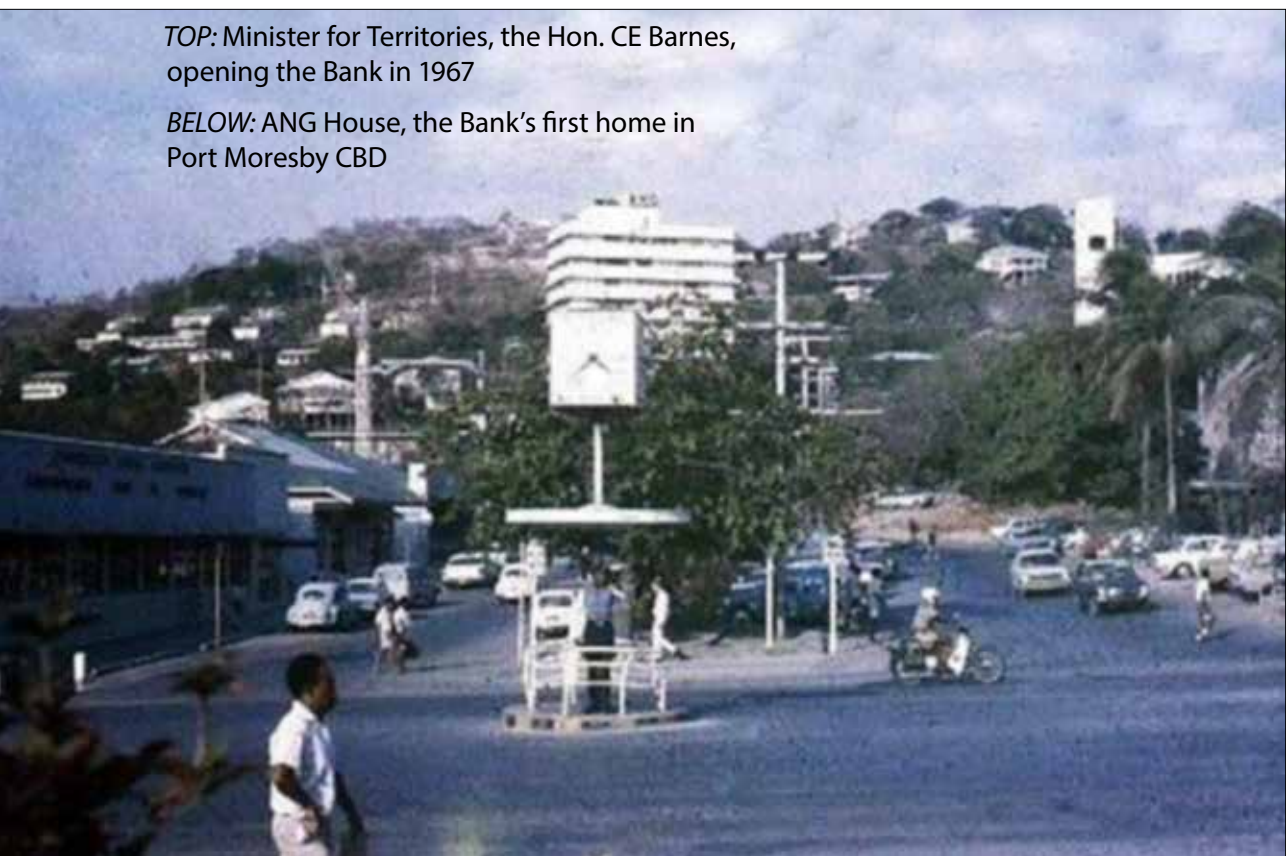
While the ESCS gave an important boost to agricultural development through the expansion of expatriate-owned plantations after introduction of the scheme in November 1958, by the late 1960s many of these enterprises had seen better days. Indeed, it is very likely that a number of them may never have been destined to succeed as the key requirements for obtaining a loan were a record of war service and the ability to present a business case that demonstrated reasonable prospects of success. Experience in the chosen enterprise was not a necessary prerequisite for an expatriate to be granted a loan of \$50,000. When I joined the Bank, a number of properties had already been abandoned and thirteen were already in the Bank's possession with expectations of another seven or so to be taken over in the coming twelve months. Our challenge was to recover as much as possible of the debt, which in most cases was well in excess of the original \$50,000 loan. Amongst the properties with which I had some involvement were copra plantations on New Ireland and in the Madang, Milne Bay and Central Districts, rubber plantations at Cape Rodney, cocoa plantations near Popondetta in the Northern District and coffee plantations in the Bulolo/Wau area.

These 'problem' plantations were dealt with in a variety of ways. Initially, they were put up for auction but in the event that they failed to reach the reserve price other options had to be pursued. For those that were reasonably viable propositions in their current state the Bank appointed managers to ensure the properties were properly maintained and generated as much revenue as possible while sale



TOP: Minister for Territories, the Hon. CE Barnes, opening the Bank in 1967

BELOW: ANG House, the Bank's first home in Port Moresby CBD



opportunities were pursued. In some cases nearby plantation owners were granted harvesting rights. Others were subdivided into lots from which smallholder families could generate a reasonable income and were leased to interested local people. The process of subdivision involved considerable liaison with the Department of Lands, to make sure everything we were doing was legally correct, as well as with the prospective block holders. We determined the block boundaries ourselves, which were subject to final approval by the Department of Lands, and prepared maps, budgets and development plans for each block to support the applications for finance submitted by the new owners.

The main area in which I was involved with the subdivision of plantations was Cape Rodney, where the rubber blocks represented an extension of the nearby rubber land settlement scheme, which was being developed under the guidance of DASf personnel. The majority of the people interested in taking up these blocks had previously worked on the plantations so were fairly well versed in how to tap and process the rubber. This experience removed one of the concerns that always had to be addressed when lending to rural enterprises, whether small or large: the question of management expertise.

Properties in a more rundown state were sold off to interested expatriates or local groups. In some cases, all that was worth salvaging was some of the plant and equipment. On one occasion I had to try and retrieve a tractor and Land Rover from an abandoned plantation near Marshall Lagoon, 100 miles or so down the coast from Moresby. I was in the area, at Cape Rodney, on other business so got a ride with someone to Kupiano from where we took a dinghy across to the plantation, taking with us a motorbike for the few miles we had to travel to the property once we landed. Retrieving the vehicles would be much easier if they could be driven, so along the way I enlisted the help of a mechanic from the local Salvation Army mission. Try as we might we were not able to get the vehicles going so had to try again another time.

This exercise does, however, illustrate how we worked with whatever resources were at our disposal to get the job done, a feature of working anywhere in TPNG at that time. Flying into Cape Rodney was quite straightforward as it was serviced by regular flights. From there, though, I had to arrange to get by road to Kupiano, pick up the motorbike, meet up with the mechanic, then by dinghy across Marshall Lagoon and back again, return the motorbike, then to the nearest airstrip at Paili for the return flight to Moresby. Often we called on the help of people from all walks of life—government departments, private businesses, missions and local villagers—and all gave readily of their time. We, of course, reciprocated as we were able—as I will outline a little later—and this is the way everyone got things done in those days; we applied common sense and didn't get tied up in too many rules and regulations.

Cocoa plantations in the Popondetta area represented a particular challenge in that extensive areas of plantings had been ravaged by the Pantorhytes weevil, the larvae of which bored into the sapwood of the tree trunks and branches, weakening or even killing the trees. The Bank provided considerable support to a number of plantation owners as they explored, with mixed success, various means of controlling this serious pest. Some plantations were taken on by neighbouring growers whose rehabilitation efforts had met with some success while others went into alternative land uses and still others were provided with some form of debt relief to allow them to walk away with some dignity.

The next chapter looks at the broader role I enjoyed with the PNG Development Bank over the seven-year period 1970–77 and how it evolved in that time.

ENDNOTE

- 1 From *Meeting the Challenge: The Papua and New Guinea Development Bank 1967-1980*, edited and published by Rodney Cole, 2015. This book, which records the early history of the Bank, is available in the National Library of Australia and various State libraries as well as being for sale on Amazon.

8: Development Bank Role Broadens

My role with the Development Bank quickly expanded to undertaking field appraisals of new loan applications for large-scale rural enterprises and regular reviews of existing facilities. Most of these properties were owned and operated by expatriates although over the years a small number of local people took on larger operations. Smallholder loans were essentially looked after by the local didiman, with support from the local Development Bank Representative where they existed.

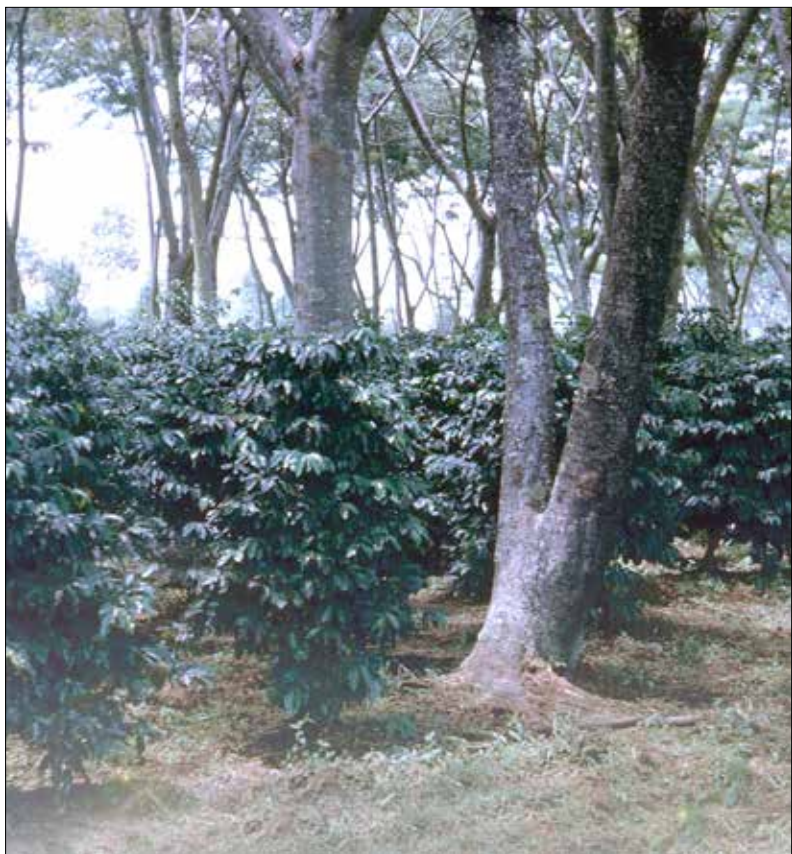
The range of rural enterprises was quite broad. Cattle, pigs, poultry, coffee, tea, oil palm, cocoa, copra and rubber were the main pursuits but sorghum, vegetables, ginger, soya beans, cardamoms and fish farming also featured. The large rural enterprises that the Bank funded were generally well run. Some had ventured into relatively new (for PNG) areas of activity and their operations were quite extensive and, in some cases, quite complex; I'm thinking particularly of tea, which was introduced to the Western Highlands in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By the mid-1970s thousands of acres had been planted on the fertile plains outside Mt Hagen and the tea was processed in large factories on the individual estates. Coffee plantations also featured fairly prominently amongst our Highlands clientele and these were mostly quite successful operations.

The role of the rural officer was to visit the property and gather all the information required by the Bank's lending staff in order to make informed decisions on whether or not to approve loans, maintain existing facilities, adjust security arrangements or repayments and so on. When at a property, therefore, it was necessary, through a



TOP: Tea picking in the
Wahgi Valley, Western
Highlands

RIGHT: Flourishing Arabica
coffee plantation under
Leucaena glauca shade
near Mt Hagen, Western
Highlands



thorough physical inspection and detailed discussions with the owner and/or manager, to get a good understanding of developments already undertaken, determine whether existing loan funds had been used effectively, know what was planned for the future, review past production and financial figures, prepare estimates of future performance through to a stable year-in-year-out position and collect details of all buildings, plant and equipment on the place and, later, value these. Often it was necessary to follow up with clients' accountants to get the full financial details. Back in the office all this information was put into the appropriate forms, which were based on those used by Australia's Commonwealth Development Bank, and a full written report prepared.

Most clients did all they could to help convey a realistic picture of their business. Only very occasionally was cooperation not all that forthcoming. My very first field trip was an interesting introduction to some of the difficulties that could be encountered. Our initial meeting with what could politely be described as a 'crusty' old coffee grower provided us with some figures that didn't appear to make a lot of sense. He also led us to believe that new labour quarters for which Bank funds had been made available were well advanced. A later inspection of the property showed us no sign of the supposed new facility. There was, however, a fairly substantial new residence under construction, no mention of which had been made in our earlier meeting with the owner. Technically, I suppose, a house could be considered a form of 'labour quarters', but I don't think this is what the Bank had in mind. Later, this property sold to a successful neighbouring plantation owner and it subsequently prospered.

The spirit of goodwill that generally existed between the Bank's rural officers and their clients saw our role extending beyond simply undertaking our prime role of assessing business prospects. It was not at all unusual for us to follow up on the purchase of equipment and materials or gather technical information on behalf of clients. These were, after all, the days before the Internet and other forms of

sophisticated communication that we take for granted these days. I can remember, for example, spending quite a bit of time chasing up information and getting quotes on freezer facilities for a client with a large cattle property in the Jimi Valley of the Western Highlands. For other clients I recall ordering and arranging the shipping of fencing materials and rubber tapping equipment, clearing pasture seed through Customs, taking delivery of a tractor and shipping it to New Ireland, and arranging a barge for the shipment of cattle from Port Moresby to a property in Milne Bay, and providing advice on how the pens should be set up on board for safe movement of the stock.

The broad range of rural enterprises funded by the Bank saw rural officers travel to all parts of the country and much of our time was spent away from home. Travelling around the country involved a range of transport that varied widely depending on the location of the properties. Air travel was, of course, essential for at least part of the journey to the great majority of places. Once the air component was completed, though, the remainder of the journey could at times be a little more interesting, not that some flights were without their moments.

A hire car or the local Bank Rep's four-wheel drive vehicle was fairly normal to get to places within striking distance of the major centres. More remote areas presented greater logistical challenges. One particularly good example was a copra, rubber and cattle plantation near Orangerie Bay in the Milne Bay District. The expatriate owner was looking at selling the place to his long-time *bosboi* (native foreman). The outward-bound journey was relatively uneventful but certainly interesting. Along with one of our Vudal graduates and the owner of the property I took an early Macair flight that called into Amazon Bay and Mamai before touching down at Baibara a little over two hours later. Then it was into a tractor-drawn trailer for the next leg. Three tractor trips and two canoe river crossings later we reached the first plantation, a distance of twelve miles having been covered in an hour. The final leg of the journey

down the coast was a somewhat faster and more comfortable dinghy trip of an hour or so.

The property inspection itself was interesting too and is worth recalling here to paint a bit of a picture of what could be involved in these field trips. Our first afternoon was spent familiarising ourselves with the property by walking over it in the company of the owner and prospective buyer. We also recorded details of most of the buildings, plant and machinery. This task was completed the next morning while it was still raining heavily then it was on to counting the old coconut palms. Thoroughly soaked by the time we had finished this job, we had a short break for lunch before repeating the process on the younger coconuts and the rubber trees. At night we worked out the effective areas of the different plantings using the tree spacings we had noted during the day. We now had the starting point for our crop production estimates which we would do back in the office using the yield guidelines that we had for all crops, prepared in consultation with various crop specialists in DASf.

The next day started with a tree count of the prospective new owner's coconuts on land adjoining the property he was looking at buying. The afternoon was spent checking out the cattle on the plantation. Halfway through counting them we had to start again as some had escaped from the less than secure yards. Rounding them all up again on foot took some time as there was no holding paddock for them once they left the yards. By late afternoon, though, the job was done. We worked until late at night extracting production, income and expenditure figures from the plantation records and continuing discussions with the owner and prospective owner.

The trip home was somewhat more eventful than the trip out four days earlier; the co-ordination (by the plantation owner) of the various parties involved didn't work out quite as planned. The first leg in the dinghy was trouble free, but on arrival there was no tractor and trailer waiting for us, so we had to walk to the first river crossing. A canoe was there to take us across but again there was no tractor waiting on the other side so off we went by foot again.



TOP: World Bank funding, through PNGDB, of large-scale cattle properties such as this one in the Jimi Valley, Western Highlands played a key role in developing the beef cattle industry

RIGHT: This family purchased this expatriate-owned copra/rubber/cattle plantation in Orangerie Bay, Milne Bay District



Within about twenty minutes of the second river crossing the tractor turned up so we jumped on board. The canoe crossing of the second river went without incident but by now we were getting used to the idea of there being no tractor and trailer on the other side—and we were not surprised. After walking for about fifteen minutes, during which time we resorted to paying some villagers to carry our bags, the tractor arrived so it was full steam ahead again to the Baibara airstrip.

Things were looking good for our one o'clock flight back to Moresby so we settled down in the little hut on the edge of the airstrip to work on the figures we had gathered during our inspection while we waited for our plane—and waited, and waited ... At six o'clock we went to the nearby plantation manager's house and tried unsuccessfully for the next three hours or so to contact Moresby to find out what had become of the plane. The plantation manager gave us a bed and the next morning the plane eventually turned up, and we did the 'milk run' back to Moresby. A day and a half at home and I was off again, this time to Mt Hagen, Lae and Wau, not nearly so eventful a trip.

Cape Rodney provided a reminder that the roads there, while generally wider and smoother than at many places in PNG, were not without their dangers. Once when visiting a rubber plantation there I saw a badly-damaged Jaguar E-Type sports car outside one of the sheds. The plantation owner told me that the local didiman had come to grief a few miles down the road some months earlier. Clearly the roads there, some paved with crushed coral which could be quite treacherous after rain, were not all that suited to testing out the capabilities of high-performance sports cars.

Chartering aircraft into some of the less accessible places was not uncommon. The large cattle property, previously mentioned, in the Jimi Valley of the Western Highlands, for example, could only be accessed on foot or by air. No prizes for guessing a chartered light aircraft was the obvious choice. It was also a great way to very quickly get a good appreciation of the extent of the operation and some of the challenges faced by the owner. Inspections there usually

started on horseback, to the less accessible areas, and then in the owner's four-wheel drive vehicle.

Around Moresby the roads were generally good enough to use ordinary cars. This relative comfort was not always without its problems though. Once I had to visit a sorghum-producing property down past Kwikila so I took the Bank's Holden sedan. The inspection went smoothly but I left for home a little later than I had hoped. As I set off dark clouds were rolling in so I hurried along to beat the rain; the Kwikila dirt roads were fairly treacherous after rain in a conventional drive car. Darkness was falling quickly and a meeting with a PMV (passenger motor vehicle) going the other way saw me slip slowly into a shallow *barat* (drain) on the edge of the road. The PMV from which I took evasive action was the last vehicle that evening.

The locals were all safely back in their villages by this time and I had no way of letting anyone know where I was so I spent the night in the car on the slippery roadside. Hungry and thirsty, I was glad to see daylight and before long some passing locals helped me dig the car out of the mud with our hands. The trip back to Moresby went without further incident—or so I thought. Not long after I returned the car, muddy but otherwise in good order, to its parking spot under ANG House one of the Bank's 'pen pushers' told me I should have washed the car before returning it. After a night on the side of the road I think it's fair to say I was less than impressed—and someone else looked after the mud-spattered car!

9: Development Bank New Initiatives

As early as 1970 the Development Bank recognised that in order to help promote more rapid development of the country it would be necessary for the Bank itself to become involved in initiating its own projects. Early initiatives were in the commercial field but by 1974 the Bank was starting to fund the development of large-scale rural ventures in less developed parts of the country—areas that were unlikely to be viable without the injection of some Government funding.

My initial trip to inspect the site of the first of these proposed ventures, several thousand acres of grassland well suited to the grazing of beef cattle in the Sugu Valley south of Kagua in the Southern Highlands, provides a further example of the logistics sometimes involved in doing our job. I was joined on this trip by a livestock specialist who had been recruited by the Bank to assist with setting up large Bank-owned projects such as this. We got away from Moresby on an early flight, flying direct to Mendi which took a bit under two hours. The next leg of the trip was in the Bank Rep's Toyota Landcruiser, driving, via Ialibu, the two and a half hours to the small Government station at Kagua where we arrived around lunch time.

While we waited here for the local didiman to turn up with three horses he was trucking in for our ride into the valley the next day, we drove a few miles out the Sugu road to remove some logs we had been told were blocking a bridge we would have to cross in the morning. Back in Kagua late in the afternoon we borrowed some farmer trainees' blankets from the agricultural station for our overnight stay with one of the kiaps who provided us with a welcome bit of floor space.



*TOP: Meeting landowners
in Sugu Valley, Southern
Highlands—1974*

*CENTRE: Sugu Bulamakau
cattle, 1976*

*RIGHT: First Yareba
Bulamakau house
underway, Safia, 1977*



After loading the horses onto the truck early next morning we set off for the Sugu Valley. After about four hours the truck bogged, indicating that this was where the horseback leg of the trip started. The ride into the valley took a further couple of hours and we spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the area, gaining a good appreciation of the extent and quality of grazing land available. Being elevated on the horses was very helpful in the long grass. We also met with the local landowners.

Late in the day we rode back to the truck, let the horses loose nearby and headed back to Kagua, a relatively quick two-hour trip in the Bank LandCruiser, arriving about 9.30 pm. The hospitality of another of the kiaps ensured a good night's sleep.

The next morning we drove back to Mendi and, after discussions with the District Agricultural Officer, took the half-hour regular TAL flight to Mt Hagen. After visiting one of our large tea-growing clients not far out of town to follow up on some previously requested figures we got on a plane for home. As was often the case, though, a direct flight was not available so we had a three-hour trip via Goroka and Lae, touching down in Moresby a bit before 7.00 pm. All up, it had taken us the best part of two and a half days getting to and from a place in which we spent barely three hours (which was all that was needed at that stage of its development). That, however, was the nature of travelling in PNG at the time—and in many situations it has perhaps not changed a great deal since then.

My final two years with the Bank saw me take on responsibility for two large-scale cattle properties that the Bank established under the Government-supported funding arrangements. By this time the first of these projects, *Sugu Bulamakau*, the development mentioned above, was already in the early stages of being set up under the management of an expatriate who had been recruited specifically for the role. He lived on the property with his wife and young son but before moving there had to build their house. There was no development at all in the valley when they first went there. Labour quarters and other buildings, fencing, yards and stocking

of the property followed soon afterwards, with the stock being walked in via Kagua.

The second cattle property that I had responsibility for in this role was in the Musa Valley of the Northern District. It had the business name of *Yareba Bulamakau*. When I became involved this project had only reached the approval stage so I had the immense satisfaction of being heavily involved in the early days of its establishment. Like Sugu, there was practically no development in the valley, just a small tin shed alongside the airstrip and a few village houses nearby. The potential, however, was immense with a vast area of good grassland and the big Musa River along one boundary. Compared with Sugu, though, it had one important advantage: there was a very good, long airstrip in the centre of the valley. Again, we recruited an experienced expatriate to manage the day-to-day operations on the ground and he and I worked closely together for some months making all the necessary arrangements to get the project off the ground.

In the course of this preparatory work, *Yareba Bulamakau* can take some credit for a close encounter I had with Queen Elizabeth II during her Silver Jubilee visit to Moresby in March 1977. I had been away all week and when I got back to the office had to dash down to Boroko to pick up something for the project. As I turned onto the main road near Six Mile in my grubby LandCruiser I was surprised to see thousands of locals lining the road. Then they started waving and cheering. I thought I'd better respond with a few waves of my own but my mind was racing: 'What's going on here?' It was then that I glanced in my rear vision mirror and caught a glimpse of four police motorcycles followed by a black car with a flag on its bonnet. Suddenly I twigged: I was leading the Queen's motorcade! I beat a hasty retreat at the next exit, trusting that my waves had been sufficiently regal for the occasion. Clearly the security arrangements for the royal visit had not extended to blocking all the minor roads joining the Hubert Murray Highway along which the Queen travelled from the airport.

Amongst many other things that were done in preparation for the start of the project, we negotiated with the Defence Force to use one

of their DC3s to fly all the initial materials and equipment into Safia, the airstrip in the valley where the property was to be developed. Fuel, a generator, a slasher (for the tractor that would be brought in later), a portable sawmill, building materials, tools and a motorbike were all amongst a full payload on the first flight in. The Defence Force also made a barge available to transport the initial batch of cattle from Moresby to a landing point at Pongani, down the coast from Popondetta. Others to support the project included the New Zealand High Commission which responded favourably to our approach to donate the portable sawmill.

When the first mob of cattle was shipped to Pongani there were no unloading facilities and the barge had to anchor a little offshore. The cattle were herded into the water and had to swim ashore and be held in temporary yards when they reached land. From there they were walked into the property along a rough track, a trip that took three or four days. Of the 300 or so cattle in that first mob four had to be destroyed when they broke their legs while trying to negotiate the many fallen trees that had not been fully removed from the track by the bulldozer operator who was supposed to have left a clear path for the animals. The track was prepared properly for later drives and not one animal was lost from the 1,500 or so subsequently walked in.

As was the case with the Sugu property, the manager's first task was to build a home on the property for himself and his wife and three young daughters. Within five years, they had managed to establish a vibrant community alongside the airstrip at Safia, including a school and aid post (both funded by the Government), slaughter house, sawmill and staff accommodation. Cattle numbers, built up from the five lots walked in from the coast after being barged there from various locations, totalled over 5,000 and beef was regularly air freighted out to Port Moresby. When they were well settled on the property, the manager and his wife ran the annual Safia races on the airstrip and people flew in from all over the country to be part of this signature event. The viability of the property was tested a few years after its establishment when DC3s were taken out of commission and the beef



New Development Bank Head Office building at Waigani,
opening performance on 7 August 1975

had to be flown to Moresby on Twin Otters. Overnight the cost of airfreighting the beef went from 5 toea a kg to 15 toea.

The model used for Sugu and Yareba proved to be very successful in bringing economic and social development to areas that would otherwise have struggled to attract the necessary investment. Extension of this project concept saw a total of five large-scale cattle properties having been developed by the Bank by 1981, making it the second largest beef producer in Papua New Guinea at that time.

Training of the local staff was always an important priority for us. As Papua New Guinea moved first to Self-Government on 1 December 1973 and Independence on 16 September 1975, and then into the post-Independence era, expatriate staff were always very mindful of the fact that one of their responsibilities was to work themselves out of a job. None of us, I'm sure, wanted to leave the country without having done as much as we possibly could to try and ensure a smooth and lasting transition to the local staff. In Chapter 7 I mentioned the training given to our Vudal graduates from the very early days. Across the Bank, though, similar initiatives were taken and I and others in the Rural Department played a role in this broader training by preparing and presenting various training programs.

One particular training module that I prepared covered the role of the agricultural extension officer in rural credit, providing guidance on budgeting, determining loan requirements and assessing a project's capacity to repay the proposed loan, supported by examples based on actual case studies. At another time a joint Asian Development Bank/PNG Development Bank/Fiji Development Bank training program, 'Development Banking for the South Pacific Region', was developed. Along with other PNGDB staff, I spent a considerable amount of time preparing case studies and other material for use in this program. The material I prepared was later also used in a joint DASF/PNGDB training program and was also made available to other Pacific development banks.

Come September 1977 I had to make a decision as to whether or not I would take up the offer to extend my contract with the Bank.

It was not an easy decision as I had thoroughly enjoyed my twelve years in PNG, including a particularly interesting and rewarding seven years with the Bank. In the end, though, I decided that it was time to put down some roots in Australia. I felt my PNG experiences had equipped me to face whatever challenges may be thrown at me—and the subsequent years proved that I was absolutely right. The opportunities and experiences that came my way in PNG really set me up for the rest of my career.

The 1970s was a time, both for me personally and the Bank generally, of great change, wonderful opportunity, challenges aplenty and, most of all, considerable achievement for the country and its people. The satisfaction that accompanied those achievements was immense. There can be no doubt that the establishment of the Development Bank in 1967 gave a tremendous boost to Papua New Guinea's rural sector and the broader economy in both an economic and social sense.

The boost to production that came from more readily available development finance flowed directly to the borrowers and their families, whether indigenous or expatriate. In establishing its own projects the Bank also brought direct economic and social benefits to entire communities that may well have remained neglected for many more years. Regardless of the nature of the ventures, the ensuing economic development brought employment opportunities to the broader population, new skills, greater financial independence and the opportunity for improvements in health and education.

Whether or not these potential gains have been fully realised or sustained over the years is open to debate. Regardless of one's position on these questions, though, they should take nothing away from the tremendous contribution made to the rural sector by the Papua and New Guinea Development Bank, its partners and its employees of the late 1960s and 1970s.