

# Time in West Irian

Home <http://nofrillstech.net/>

As the Twenty-First Century unfolds, it is more and more obvious that our world is getting "smaller" due to improved communications, and more careworn, due to the population explosion of humans plus the consequent need for and development of resources. This also includes tourism, an activity undertaken by those lucky enough to have the personal resources, but in reality being one more strain on the world as a whole, even in the era of so-called eco-tourism, as access and over-exploitation take their toll.

Consequently, the wild areas are shrinking, especially those where humans lived in a simpler relationship with their environment, with population balance relative to resources and use thereof. One such land affected by these changes is New Guinea, and I was lucky enough to see at least one small part of this vast and diverse island, more than 30 years ago, in the western part known as Irian Jaya, contained within a strip lying between the coast and the Ertzberg Glacier region in the mountains.

My opportunity for being there was provided by employment in a construction project. I saw large tracts of country, on foot, in trucks, and in helicopters. Night-shift, which I was principally employed on, gave me plenty of opportunities to get around I see the land, the project, and the interaction between the two. As well as the effects of this development, and the complicated logistics involved in the project, one could also observe the relations and conditions of life in the camps. This aspect would be a story in itself.

As far as the land itself was concerned, it was like seeing the beginning and the end of Paradise at one time. The life cycle of the wild country was like an endless, timeless beginning, an impression I have felt in the wild lands of other places. But, it was then also a time of change for that land, as for so many others where natural resources were more widely sought. As always, once this development begins, and the endless cycle of beginning is broken, the equilibrium of that land is broken, and then it is as if some great clock begins to count down for the continued existence of that place in its prime. The endless beginning gives way to changes that are comparative, relative, measurable, and that bend in the river, misty, steep-sided, tree-clad, timeless, and leading on to more timelessness, is irrevocably changed. The nature of the water in this archetypal river also changes, bearing the burdens of disequilibrium to be deposited so untimely elsewhere, and may even be diverted or cease to flow entirely. So it was for West Irian at that time, and more so now.

I count myself lucky that even though I was there at a time of breaking of the cycle in that place, I was able to see, here and there in valleys, at river bends, from ridges, and even from high altitude in aircraft, that timeless, endless beginning of the primeval landscape, with the merest only markings of human habitation here and there. This was what it was like, in so many other lands and cultural hearths, before there were so many of Us, and the strain of this accommodation changed the world to what it is today. It should be a matter of concern and even regret that we now raise children who may never see a real wild place, and of those who do, there will only be selected areas, and with increasingly strict controls as to access. Is this sort of ignorance, or even second-hand knowledge, really bliss?

So, how did I get to West Irian? Well, it all started with an ad in the Northern Territory News for someone who could speak English, and entailed a long period in the bush. I was keen to investigate, as I had made the long hitch North for just that sort of work, and with it the opportunity to save money towards further travel overseas. As well, I was sick of being a builder's labourer on those same fragile raised little boxes that were rising up around Darwin, only to be blown down again five or so years later. Mostly spec houses, and expediently rushed in their construction as part of the tradition of making a bob or two and then shooting through down south again to the "real" Australia, aided and abetted by construction laws just too laid back, in retrospect. One thing about The Cyclone, it certainly sorted out those who wanted to enjoy a lifestyle in the North, and also produced the building standards that more sensibly housed them. Anyway, that was all just on the fringe of this story, but it was no surprise to me later that so many houses did blow down that time, after getting an extra-close view of how they were built; why, they would sway just with someone walking up the stairs, floor coverings would lift with every breeze, and there was no extra cross-bracing, to name a few building "irregularities" of the pre-Tracy era..

Back to the job, which turned out to be radio "operator", two-way ground to ground and ground to air (voice only, thus good English speaker needed), on and around a construction project that was to lead to development of a copper mine in the mountains, some 70 miles inland, and thousands of feet higher in altitude. Conditions were 10 hours per day, 7 days per week, location variable, and you worked there, it seemed, until you had enough, and pulled the pin, or broke contract if you had one. Visas, malaria pills, plane flight, new land and prospects of new experiences, both geographical and occupational all added to the interest.

Well, I could go on about the project and the camps, which were run by Americans, with the best of their talent for organisation and the worst of their attitudes towards other races, and for the inevitable attrition suffered by the environment in the name of business. Of course, it could be argued that earthquakes do that sort of environmental damage, and that anyway resources are "needed", especially exportable commodities like copper, for the coffers of a Third World nation like Indonesia. So does the music play on the bandwagon of change....

Certainly, the indigenes suffered from the cultural contact, a process already underway in the whole region before the project camps came, courtesy of the missionaries and traders of yore. But diseases were the worst problem, simple events like the flu taking a terrible toll. Stone-Age self-sufficiency was giving way to fringe dwelling dependence. This was also the before the time of mass transmigration from other parts of Indonesia. What the situation is these many years later, I cannot say. Certainly, what I saw then of the toll on human and environmental elements took a toll of my optimism for the region's future. In the end, as I understood more of such problems, and also grew tired of the conflicts and the factions in the camps, I was finally glad to leave. Witnessing the irrevocable changes that affected the whole hinterland bought to mind the old Chinese curse "may you live in uncertain times", and the reminder that that change may not always be for the better.

The work camps on the project contained various western nationalities, mostly from the US, and then there were mostly Indonesians and Phillipinos, in the Asian contingent. There were different canteens as well as different standards of

accommodation in those camps, too, with a marked difference between the standards. At times, disputes arose about those differences, but there was only one way in, and one way out, and special permits to be there, so the Americans held all the aces, as they say. I do remember one American negro who probably felt worse off than anyone else, as he did not really fit in anywhere. He was well-travelled, and very interesting to talk to, as I recall.

I also made friends with many of the other non-Europeans, as this was the biggest agglomeration of cultural differences that I had come across thus far, and now there to observe at close quarters in camp conditions. (I was yet to experience Asia for myself at this time.) This did attract the odd comment from the less tolerant Americans, although they were mostly the sort who would never have travelled out of the YooeesS of Aay unless sent under work-related conditions. These types stuck to themselves and their respective camps, with a few notable exceptions, and took no interest in the magnificent hinterland, which to me seemed such a waste of opportunity. A few of them took up eating in a big way as a diversion; not surprising, I suppose, certainly I had not seen so much food since Army camp, with bottomless cups, bowls, glasses, and plates to eat off, and drink out of. Of course, many were there for money to pay their mortgages, or to send their kids to college, and were doubtless good citizens in their own world, but cultural mixing was not part of their world view. Some suffered quit badly from homesickness, but did little to relieve their boredom. Still, we were in work camps, rather than cultural clubs, but diversion was usually limited only by individual imagination.

Other Australasians and Europeans present seemed to fare better because of more liberal or flexible views. There was even a Dutchman with a family in Indonesia who was on the project for two years straight as an opportunity to set himself and family up for life. He was an interesting character, as I remember, and more Eastern than Western in outlook. Last, but not least, were those amazing Korean cooks (in the Western messes) who managed to make bulk production of all that food more appetising than hotels in big cities. The Korean steak dish called shikoki was one I do remember well, all these years later, and the salad bar that went with it. Asians cooked for Asians in other messes when the numbers warranted the separation of nationalities. Certainly, I enjoyed sampling the Asian cooking, new and mysterious as it was, despite more sidelong glances from the racial purists. The project was supposed to be dry, but of course, the Americans led the way with the usual rule-bending and breaking they seem to manifest as part of their go-getting initiatives. Brewed "hooch" (from various substances, mostly of a fruity nature), with a smuggled "spike" added seemed to be the usual pacifier. In this respect, the Muslims in the camps were a marked contrast with their indifference to the absence of alcohol.

The indigenes in that area of West Irian were mostly pygmies, or close to it, with a very basic subsistence lifestyle, and a shortish lifespan from the wear and tear of their lives, or from the lingering effects of introduced illnesses like TB, influenza, or VD. They were very lively in outlook, belying the primitive nature of their existence, and easily adjusted to bartering and trading with the "outsiders". This was costly for one village in contemporaneous times, whose population was almost halved by influenza introduced after contact with an adjacent camp, no doubt in turn imported from Darwin with a leave-taker or new employee.

These natives had small crude bows, and arrows without flights which they enjoyed showing ("one arrow for bird, one for cus-cus {wallaby}, and one for human".) With bones in their noses, firesticks, and little dilly bags and hair nets of vegetable fibre, they were fascinating to see. They soon learnt to charge in goods or rupiahs for photo poses or fire-making demonstrations. But cast-offs and pilfered goods from the camps were beginning to change all that, and a lifestyle based on their crude patches of sweet potato and ubiquitous pigs, on transient slash and burn sites, would soon be changing for that of fringe dwelling in the future, irrespective of what fringe was to follow.

The larger populations lived in the more temperate and less mosquito-ridden highlands, but even so, they left small evidence of their existence after the millennia of subsistence. The new human conquest would be far more dramatic, with a totally different and dominant technology to power the changes. The lowland coastal natives lived in the tidal fringes of the coast, and had fires continually burning in clay and stone pans in their canoes, which may indeed have been permanent homes for some of them. Others lived in raised huts on overgrown silt-banks in the inter-tidal zone of the rivers. These aspects of other lives I had glimpses of on a couple of hitch-hikes to the coastal barge port. I did not see how other coastal villages lived, as having not seen the true ocean border of the region.

Years later, when I studied history and anthropology, I realised the significance of some of the things I had seen at that time. One can only hope that these wilder parts of New Guinea do not finish up like the Amazon Basin as the land is more and more developed, and for similar reasons like resettlement, minerals, farming and forestry. The worst casualties of all that change, after the after the flora and fauna, would always be those small tribes of indigenes. It would not be so bad if the transition to a more modern way of life was to be smoothed for them, but by the record of other lands over time, and even with the best of intentions, the omens were not good. I did see one magnificent native from the interior who turned up one day to "inspect" a camp where I was stationed at the time. Or so it seemed, as he had absolutely no fear of anyone. At least 6 six feet tall, well-muscled, and with all the trimmings, Rousseau would have drooled over him as the epitome of the noble savage. That day, there were none of the usual indigenes locals to be seen anywhere! Apparently they did not fancy the prospect of being pygmy stew, as in past times, or so the story went.

All around the camps, and the ribbon of crude gravel road that connected them, was the jungle. So green it hurt the eyes, so imposing, so timeless, yet so inherently fragile, and no match for modern technology and "development". But the great buttress-rooted evergreens of the lowlands and foothills still took time, sweat, and sharp chainsaws to bring them down. Helicopters made the job so much easier, as soon as the first jungle sites were cleared; workers could wage war on the jungle, and be back in the nearest camp that night. Soon, all those initial clearings would be connected by the new road.

The climate of the area, from the sea to the mountains, was usually wet, with regular, even daily incessant drumming rains, and rising rivers in the beds of which one could here the crunching and thumping of the rocks rolling, even above the roar of the water. The upland torrents would be brown with the weathering of upland slopes, (and road-building induced erosion, no doubt), and the lowland rivers flowed wide brown and relentless toward the sea with their burden of silt and whole trees. Sometimes it would rain

for days on end in the lowlands, fraying the nerves of those who never adjusted to the magnificent overabundance of water. Sheets of water would flow across the ground, the road works would be slippery and dangerous, and bridges would be approached with care.

Yet despite the elements, and away from 'progress', the land of the timeless beginning was then still young, steep and jagged, still resisting the great forces of weathering that had gone on for so long, and still is rising from the sea according to geologists. There was so much rain, it was as if all the water that did not fall on the great dry continent to the south, fell instead on this island straddling the equator, rising as it does to over 20,000 feet in the highlands, providing the ideal conditions for such precipitation. Rain also shaped the camp life and disposition. Duckboards marked the thoroughfares and perimeters of the camps, linking the rectangular aluminium-sheathed demountable buildings.

Mould grew on unprotected surfaces of project-related equipment; personal possessions would need to be kept near a source of dry heat like a light bulb. The insect life was another extraordinary abundance; spraying or fogging was regularly carried out to keep them in check, especially the malaria mosquito. Around all the camps was the continuous roar of generators that produced the energy that sustained the technological bridgehead against the elements, and allowed the invasion to thrive and continue.

As the land rose, so did the climate become more temperate, and the vegetation and the climate changed accordingly. At about 3000 feet, the climate was very pleasant, quite cool at night, and the views magnificent, especially at sunrise and sunset when the weather eased. I was lucky enough to live in three camps along the upper road, so was able to experience three grades of climate, as well as the differences in geography and altitude.

Other aspects of my time in West Irian are worthy of note before I deal with particular events, a sort of 19th century style brief geographical inventory of the natural world.

Animals were few. I did see the odd wallaby-like 'cus-cus' marsupial, but insects, reptiles and birds there were in abundance. The water pythons were of great length, and colourful, and I remember the first bird of paradise I ever saw, calling and displaying, echo upon echo of his call sounding in the jungle, flashing and dancing in his magnificent plumage.

Helicopters were a great means of getting about when the opportunity arose, with a light payload and a blind eye of the loadmaster. I had contact with the pilots through my radio duties, so my presence was good humouredly tolerated, on otherwise underweight flights, as long as I embarked and disembarked on the blind side relative to administration at respective landing-sites. I had some amazing journeys, often as morning mists beginning to lift, the chopper swooping and weaving above the valleys and ridges, cargo slings swinging also. One of the pilots had been in Vietnam, and he gave the wildest and most exciting rides, and was always the first into the air when the weather cleared. Usually by early afternoon, conditions in the mountains would change, and choppers would return to base. Happily, I was never caught out by weather changes on my unofficial visits to other campsites.

When I thought about it, there was a reminder of chopper chances in the form of a wreck down in a steep gully near one of the high altitude camps, but that story did have a happy ending, as the pilot and passenger walked away that time, back up the hill. However, I already had a taste for the idiosyncratic flight of choppers during Army training, and could never get enough of them. It was also interesting to watch the mechanics at work servicing and maintaining these wonderful and highly complex "freedom machines". Nowadays, I would tend to think a glider is the ideal heavier than air machine, for safety and for lack of noise. However, those flying and hovering machines which I did so much enjoy riding in were the lifeblood of the project, and as such, the main instruments of the changes that would continue to come to the region.

But then, on those rides, what I could begin to comprehend was the size and scope of the land, rising so dramatically from the sodden saltwater swamps and deltas of the coasts under the great green carpet of the jungle, to the jagged and snowy caps of the mountains. A Gondwanaland panorama that rose up of rifted valleys, torrents, mists, and jungle. A savage tropical Eden, with only a scattering of humans, lay down there in the deep green maze. I saw this over and over again, on the first flight in when I arrived, on all the stolen chopper trips, and again on my flight back to red-brown Australia, dry and sprawling, months later. In all that time, I never tired of that vista, and devoured it with my eyes and whatever senses I could bring to bear wherever I was, and no matter how I was travelling at the time, whether by air or by land.

This is my enduring memory of tropical West Irian. Would that I could see that sight again, just one more time. Or perhaps after so many years, with all the changes that would have ensued, do I still have the best in my mind's eye? I have seen bush, mountains and jungles and deserts before and since, but West Irian was something different, something special.

Certainly, and especially 20 years on, for the world in general, the island of New Guinea is one of the last great wilderness areas in a world grown smaller and tatter, with exploration and great discoveries reduced to anecdotes and destinations in modern travel guides. As noted, I do know that the exploitation of resources, which was also the reason I had a job there at the time, has continued apace, as has transmigration from other parts of Indonesia, so there would be many changes since. Certainly, as an prime example, the road from the coast caused much erosion of thin-soils and jungle vegetation from the steep mountain sides and passes it traversed. The mine that was developed was also huge in extent, and later dogged by human controversy as well, as arguments evolved over land and profit sharing.

My time on the project was packed with things to do; somehow I did even manage enough sleep to keep healthy, though never the deep sleep of a winter night nearer the 45th parallel. But as long as I got my head down before the tropical dawn for a few hours sleep, I had enough rest to get on with other things. Apart from helicopter rides, I would also hitch-hike long distances with the gravel and maintenance trucks as far as I could go, and still get back to work on time. Food was not a problem, as I could eat as much as I needed on the night shifts. Water was the main thing to consider in the heat and humidity of tropical day, before food.

When the weather was fine for a few hours, I could go running to for 10 or 15 miles on the gravel roads, sometimes with a friend

from Biak who could speak English, and who worked as a plant attendant on the night shift. When there were no vehicles on the road, and just us and the sounds of our feet, and our breathing, it was a welcome relief from the camp, but without a battle on bush tracks, the best of both worlds, really. Here I might add that I never have taken extra salt in any climatic region where I have lived, no matter what my exercise or work level, and do not have it on my grocery bill at any time, and try to avoid salty foods of any kind. It is a fallacy that one should take extra salt in the tropics, as this artificially raises the fluid requirements to dilute blood electrolytes, and so the salt-consumer is locked into a cycle of want and discomfort. I have found that drinking when one has been sitting, and cooled down first, as well as eating those foods rich in potentially useful salts, (potassium rather than sodium-based, note), is adequate maintain the whole cooling and blood electrolyte balance, to the extent that one's water requirements are noticeably less than others who do not follow this regime. This also includes stints in unforgiving areas like the NT outback in the hot sun during the monsoon build-up, and walking long distances with no more water available than one can carry.

The other rule is, when water is available in the evenings, sip away until urine is clear again; with long-term kidney health in mind, do not to sleep until this state is achieved. Note, alcoholic drinks in excess are not advised in tropical areas, although one can of beer before turning in, on occasion, will result in a sound sleep. The diuretic effect of alcohol is especially important in the tropics, only low alcohol drinks will actually replace water that is lost by diuretic action accelerated by drinking them. Fresh clean water is the ideal if obtainable, and tea is better than coffee for the kidneys; the average soft drink is only for when there is no other clean water alternative, because the sugar and other adulterants can only be concentrated in the body, and must also be eliminated along with other waste products. There is also the fact of the stroke rate in Northern Japan being so high where so much soy/salt concentrate is consumed as part of the normal diet. Amazing what one will read in the dead of a tropical night on radio watch, and that includes volumes on Tropical Medicine from the Camp Doctors reference library, all perused with a background of rain or insects, or both..! Where did this salt thing start in temperate areas? When introducing iodine to populations whose soil/water/food is lacking in iodine. A meal of fish each week would do the same thing, but still the consumption of adulterated salt is encouraged in the face of medical contra-indications. So much for the health plug.

Oh well, on with the story, and so much for the introductory details. For the rest, I will stick with the modest adventures I had at the time, mainly because I worked on the night shift, and 10 hours per day still left for all kinds of activities, and these did not include being camp-bound.

There was a small portable sawmill, near by the base camp, where some of the doomed arboreal giants were recycled for building timber, plant machinery bearers, or timbers for tunnel construction. One of the first jobs I had as a teenager was in a bush mill, back among the native forests of NZ where I was born, but this was something even more basic. A VW motor and a circular saw blade, as a single unit, ran up and back on rails past the timber; ie, the saw was bought to the log, and it was impressive what this rugged little unit could do. I spent time learning the operation, and helping the operators when I had time off while in that particular camp.

In regard to the job on the radio, the "shack" was usually off to one side of the administration offices in each camp, with an aerial mast rising beside it. A chair and desk beside two different radio sets and a bank of batteries were standard equipment inside. My main contribution to the radio system was to introduce carbon copies of messages to be kept on file after sending, to end all arguments and recriminations about who said what to who and when. A multi-million dollar construction project had been in full swing with no carbon copies of any radio messages being kept. Oh well, matters improved after that.

Most of the radio traffic was day-to-day construction, weather and flight reports interestingly representative of the scope of the actual project, if a bit hum-drum at times. Happily, there were few crises to deal with, apart from minor accidents and injuries, although I do remember once having to call back the Australian-based supply plane, to pick up a suspected skull fracture case to take back to Darwin. As it turned out, the injury was not so serious, just a misreading of hastily-taken X-rays by an assistant doctor in a small mountain camp. In fact, given the extent of the project, the safety rate was very good, at least as I remember.

One minor event in one radio shack was the camp cat deciding to have kittens in dry and secure conditions. For a month or so, I was able to study at great length the development of the family in between radio calls. What happened to the cat, (bought in to keep down any rodents, introduced or otherwise), I do not know, but they needed supplementary rations from the camp. Had they escaped into the jungle, I doubt if they would have survived as wildcats do in Australia. So many pythons would have fancied a feline snack, no doubt?

Although the people were interesting, their existence was so meagre as to be depressing, at least to my uninitiated observation. Perhaps they were not sited in a particularly fertile area. I have read that life in the east of the island is easier and more diverse. Primitive smoky huts stood near meagre sweet potato gardens hacked and burnt out of jungle on sunny slopes. The huts were raised on stilts because of rain and snakes, and the insides were dominated by smoky fires to keep insects away, and the result was coughing and red eyes, and still mosquitoes. How much we take for granted, with mosquito netting fitted to whole houses and buildings in more developed tropical areas. I was well aware that in my 20's, as I was then, that I would count as middle-aged by indigenous reckoning, yet with many more years to go with my First World start in life, and ongoing support and protection of nutrition and medical prophylaxis protecting me against the very things that would wipe them out so much younger, including the wear and tear of their actual daily existence. So much for the real Elysium, being nothing like a modern First World dream of a much gentler 'Return to Nature.'

On one occasion while at a camp in the mountains, I went hiking with a medical orderly visiting a nearby village, where a local chief needed some medicine which would be provided as a PR gesture by the project. The interpreter said that it was just a few hours away, and I was eager to get well away from the road for a change, so I was happy to go along for the walk. Well, after 6 hours, I had to turn back to start work in 6 hours time, so one of the villagers guided me back, and I rewarded him with as much food as I could "borrow" from the canteen. The medical orderly came back three days later, so something had been lost in the translation vis á vis the original distance estimation. I actually made it back to work with a half hour or so to spare, as a matter of fact, and was

very grateful to my guide for his help. No doubt he would have been much quicker over the ground on his own. Certainly, he had to walk all the way back once more to his village. But he had got me back to work on time, so no **please explain** was needed, fortunately.

I developed a healthy respect for the way those little fellows could walk on those thick fibro-fatty pads on the bottoms of their feet, making those steep, slippery and winding tracks seem like a stroll, unerring in their navigation of rugged country. Never have I complained on a hike since, after seeing how easy they made it seem, river crossings and all, patiently and surely ambling on their way, with the odd diversion for game-spotting. What would it have been like to be one of those district officers of bygone days in the Papua of colonial lore. Ah well, a glimpse was better than nothing, I suppose.

Then, there was The Raft, which I proposed to float down the perpetually swollen river from the base camp where I was working at the time, to the barge-port near the sea. Not all at once, mind you, as the road followed reasonably close to the river. I would do the trip in three sections, and hitch back to the camp after each stage in time for work, there was a crow-flies distance of about 30 miles to cover to the barge port near the coast according to local knowledge. With my sawmill contacts, and the odd empty oil drum around the camp, there was no problem as to materials, and these materials would in turn determine the design. Assembling the raft would take place at the mill, where there was firm ground and enough tools for the job. I would then get a quick lift to the nearby river with a passing ute, and the rest I and the river would do together.

So it was. Two main 4x4s were the keel, four more 4x2s nailed and lashed sideways supported this, and carried a plank for a deck, also giving gaps into which were loosely lashed 4x44 gallon drums, with two more 3x2s as outriggers to protect the drums, and provide lashing support. Auxiliaries included a steering oar, (optimistic, considering the usual state of the river..) a rope to tie up the raft when I landed, and a shorter piece to tie me down on the small platform. A large rock on a rope as a anchor in calmer waters did start the journey, but was cut loose when, after self-deployment in a swift stretch, it worked so well after jamming that the raft came to a halt, and began to be buried by the current. Trial and error learning at its best!

At first, there was interest in the proceedings among acquaintances as I began to assemble the raft, and eager hands to help load it. But a suggestion of an expedition with more than one raft did not meet with so much enthusiasm! Certainly, there were no offers to travel steerage. But the camp ute was readily made available for a quick "unofficial" trip to the nearest suitable launching site, all hush-hush, of course. Certainly, the raft was strong, but also made of green fresh-cut timber, plus the weight of the four drums, so when it did make the water, it actually floated quite low by the time I also got on board, so the overall effect was to have a stable, strong, and relatively non-steerable craft with which to commence my small odyssey. I took a photo before the launch, sadly, it has since been lost.

When the raft was dropped from the ute at the waters edge just below the camp, I found out about the lower than expected flotation when I had to heave the raft over and around rocks to get to the main current. The chosen launching-spot was on the outside of a curve, and I had to get further toward the inner side for deep water. This I did on my own, as others were observing daily working hours, although I found out later that I did have an appreciative audience watching from the canteen during the meal-break, who obviously thought that I would not get very far downstream.

But as far as I was concerned, a tropical rain-fed river, running from at least the foothills of those mountains towards the coastal plain, had good possibilities, if only I could actually catch the current, which ran deep and fast in its narrow, if variable, bed. Width of the river being anything from 10 yards to 50 yards wide, from what could be seen from the new road at different points. However, the struggle past the rocks suddenly came to an end as I reached deeper flowing water, gave one last heave, threw myself onto the raft as the current caught hold, and I was away with a surge like a water-skier taking off. The watchers at the camp said later, one minute I was there, and the next minute, I was gone. And from then on, the action hardly stopped for the next 5 miles or so, while the river ran its course through the last of the foothills.

My main memory of the journey now was of the surging power of the river, the raft pitching, yawing, and even revolving, while thuds and booms that sounded as the raft grounded on submerged rocks. I suppose I was yahooing wildly for the first mile or so, and just hanging on while getting the feel of the raft. Due to logistic problems, of course, there had been no previous flotation or sea/river worthiness trials before the hard work of the launch. I knew I would not be able to get the raft out of the river for several miles before the next bridge, or, risk losing the raft in a flash flood before I could get back if it was moored. Thus, the first time in the current committed me to keep going until the raft reached the nearest bridge, where I knew I could beach the raft downstream of the abutment. So that was where I was headed with the raft, steep learning curve and all.

On a couple of occasions, I remember sliding out of the main current on wider bends and being obliged to get off the raft, and giving a couple of heaves to get underway again, scrambling to get aboard as once again the current took hold. Progress, though, was mainly continuous, rather like a peripatetic water-borne merry-go-round. I was surprised at the battering the raft received, it was like travelling with a percussion band at some stages, yet at other times, in the middle of the steam, there would be almost a silence, and the air still, as the raft travelled as fast as the breeze itself above the surface, and I would lift my head to the blue sky above the great trees and revel in the beauty and the whole miniature and private adventure I was having, alone and in random mode, whereabouts only approximately known.

Wondering about the trip since, I thought that my semi-flexible handiwork did quite well, steer ability aside. Perhaps a rubber raft would have to have been very thick-skinned to avoid damage, due to the jaggedness of the rocks encountered, despite the fact that inflatables react differently in the water, with flex and give. At one stage, and I had time to think about it as I approached this particular defile, the river narrowed in to a couple or three yards wide due to a rock-fall still lodged in the bed. Fiddling with the steering oar achieved little and as the current sped up, due to the efforts of the river to fit through the gap. In the event, there were no problems, as the raft went through the gap plumb in the middle of the torrent, pointing ahead, being airborne briefly on the other side with the speed of its passage through the gap, and then crashed down again into deep water on the other side of the gap,

plunging back into the stream with such force that I was submerged to the ears until the faithful, and still watertight, drums did their work, bearing their burden again to the surface.

Probably by good luck or reflexes I had closed my mouth in time as I went over the spill; certainly it must have been wide open in amazement as we cleared the gap. I remained with the raft because I had such a grip of the safety rope that ran across the raft. Without that rather basic safety measure, all could have been lost. Some time after this, I remember stopping after slowing in shallow water at the outside of another great curve, thinking that I would soon be at the bridge, and the excitement would have ended. So, to savour the moment, I sat for a while in the sun, looking at the dints in the barrels, and at the passing river, and wishing the whole thing would never end. Even the weather was on my side that day, and above the jungle, the sky was only just beginning to cloud with afternoon cumulus. I was already planning at that point to get the raft back to the camp for an overhaul, and another attempt on the foothills section of the river if I possibly could.

Reluctantly, I set off again knowing that even though I had dodged sleep that day, I would still need to heed time to be sure of making it back to the camp in time for night shift. After another couple of less eventful miles I recognised the opening-out of the valley, as the lower foothills merged with the plain, and then the bridge came into sight. I steered the raft to where I could pass under one of the wooden spans, and made towards the shelving shore below the abutment. At this stage, the river was much more sedate, and manoeuvring was so easy it was almost anti-climactical after the excitement upstream. The raft beached, and I dragged it up the sandy incline as high as I could, inspected the lashings and dents, then dried out in the sun while I waited for the next passing vehicle driving back to the camp.

A couple of days were to pass before I made it back to the raft again, mostly to do with weather. Meanwhile, back at the camp, one or two seemed surprised to see me back, at least on time for work, and I was told about the amused audience watching my laborious launching procedure. When asked what it had been like, I replied to the effect that they should try for themselves and did not go into too many details about the ride, in case this jeopardised my plans being revealed for rafting the next two projected longer stretches on towards the barge port near the sea.

When I did get back to the raft, it was as I had left it, so all I needed to do was drag it back to the waters edge, and push off, and hang on. In anticipation of a long day ahead, I had bought some rations with me this day, and was determined to have a leisurely time of it on the slower-flowing reaches. A camera was considered for a record of the downstream trip, but I contented myself with a couple of shots at the bridge, and cached the camera in a bag until I came that way again, rather than risk getting it wet. At this stage of the river's progress, the land was now sloping gradually towards the coast. The current was not so fast, but there was plenty of water, all the same, and soon the bed was 100 yards wide, or more, and more streams were now entering within the next few miles.

By this time, current or not, there was a certain great relentlessness to the flow of the water; large waves roiled over sandbars or big boulders, and I did not want to know too much more about those sorts of disturbances. Certainly, there was a lot of water moving in masses of eddies, whirlpools and roils, and the raft bobbed along sedately, in slow carousel mode, with me fooling about with steering oar and practising sculling, while admiring the jungle on either bank as my view revolved. The lowland jungle was more profuse, trees were bigger, and the undergrowth much thicker and bending from the low banks to drag in the passing water.

While thus admiring the view, I did see in the distance one of these lowland jungle giants, (and I mean something well over 100 feet long, with the crown broken off), had been undermined by a change in the rivers course, fallen, and now lay half submerged out into the current. The broken trunk was well wedged across the main current. A vast pressure wave showed me just where it was in relation to the raft, in fact it was directly across my present course, and there was suddenly no time to do anything. That pressure wave just got closer and closer as the raft coasted towards it. I do remember thinking that, if I was lucky, the raft would suddenly rear up, ground on the log, and then be pushed over the trunk by the pressure wave, and then bob back up again with me hanging on like a fresh water barnacle, and the present course would resume, depending what lay on the other side, of course.

However, this is not what happened, in fact the opposite and more hazardous event occurred. The raft reared up and began to ride over the log, but then the laminar flow or whatever caught the stern, pushed it into the tree-trunk, then pulled the raft down under water, and wedged it hard against a fork, or perhaps it was part of a buttress. All this happened in majestic slow-motion, too, or so it seemed to my startled brain at the time. Once again, a swimmer's instinct (sharpened by childhood experience of the unexpected in public swimming pools, perhaps?) caused me to shut my mouth and conserve what air I had in my lungs as the raft struck, upended, and was borne down to be jammed. I thought to myself at the time, what a pity, this is the end of the line for the raft, and of the trip down river...., then realised as the water jammed me in against the raft, that it could also be the end of the line for me, with the weight of water bearing down, and trapping me hard against the upended raft.

Hardly surprising, though, considering how far out into the current on that inside curve the tree actually laid, and the depth of the river's scour at that point. It would take a good flood to shift that lot, it was so securely jammed. I was quite surprised, actually, at the sheer weight of the current, and had to use my arms and shoulders to lever myself off the raft, while I kicked my feet free of the safety rope, and began to drag myself up the surface, which I could see greenly above me. I soon surfaced, having been only a fathom so under, and as is the case on these sorts of occasions, it had all really happened quite quickly. As I reached the surface, I went over the trunk with the current, and seized a tangle of branches on the other side which were just breaking the surface, probably part of a smaller tree that had been brought down by the fall of the giant. Then it was a matter of catching my breath, and working my way back to the bank by moving from branch to branch, until I could get up out of the water on a another trunk, and then walk along the makeshift bridge to the bank proper.

After sitting down and getting my breath back, I then thought, well, I wonder how long the raft will remain there, and not without some regrets. But then again, it just goes to show that slower-flowing deep rivers can also be hazardous, even by virtue of the

sheer weight of water in motion. Certainly, I thought then that I had passed the worst of perils that I would experience in my time in that wild and unpredictable region.

So, I began to relax a little, and stayed to dry out among the insects and undergrowth, ate my rations, found still tied about my waist, dry and secure in plastic wrapping. When the mosquitoes really began to annoy me, I reluctantly set off in the direction of the road. Fortunately I had been raft-wrecked on that same side of the river, and had just realised that particular piece of good fortune. A landing on the other side would have meant a walk of miles through riverside jungle back to the bridge, or a perilous attempt at swimming the same unpredictable river to get to the road. My recent dip was enough to remind me of my fortunate land-fall. After a hundred or so yards, I stumbled out on to that thin gravel strip, with mixed feelings about how things had turned out. Very soon, a ute came by, and I was on my way back to camp and to work again, and on time too...

Later on, while talking to someone who really knew the area, I found out that, contrary to popular legend, the river that I was rafting on was not the one on which was situated the barge port after all. Had I continued, I may have had to avail myself of the hospitality and services of local tribes-people to get back to the project. Certainly, on the day that I would have found this out, I would not have been able to get back for work on time, needless to say.... Oh, well you can get lucky sometimes! Not to mention being without daily anti-malaria tablets on hand for some unforeseen period until I could obtain another supply. My ears ring to this day partly because of those tablets, but that was one sort of fever I was lucky enough to avoid in my time in various tropical parts, and had seen others suffering its torments, including local natives where I was at the time.

Looking back now, after so many years, I suppose the raft trip was a bit foolhardy; if I had gone missing, probably nothing would have been found! But as to the actual risks, I was in my early 20's, fit, and used to an outdoor life of hiking, shooting, swimming, etc, and confident of my abilities for undertaking and surviving such a venture. No-one in authority on the project seemed concerned about my possible non-return, perhaps it was considered that I would not get very far anyway. A certain liberality was needed where camp diversions were concerned, perhaps, and mine may have seemed harmless enough. Whatever kept me healthy and happy, as long as I got to work on time?

After all, it was only for a couple of days, hardly enough for the law of averages to work, or so I thought, secure in the prime of my immortal youth! I have had near-misses in water before, but still feel at home and confident in and around it. Near misses on heights have had quite the opposite effect in fact, and I avoid even ladder work! I would have called mountaineering a greater risk\*, (and I hate heights, leastwise, when not secure, or 'secure' in an aircraft or helicopter), even for the experienced, and more so for the novice. As adventures go, it was small-scale, but this one was mine alone; essential adventure elements were present, in that there was planning and anticipation, risk, (calculated or otherwise), and unexpected events; at the end, retrospective satisfaction, regret that the escapade did not last longer, and images of a trip down a wild river that still remain in my mind's eye to this day. Anyway, soon after my time in West Irian was over, and after a brief return to Darwin and the 'Territory', I was soon on my way overland to Europe, on what could be termed a major cultural adventure for a young colonial boy!

\*See **A Weekend in the Mountains**