

Monday, 15 September 2014

The Caribou banked to the west as it climbed out over the bay above Wewak. Thirty P.I.R. personnel were packed in tightly with the load master directing the routine procedure for take-off. I sat in a window seat under the port wing and watched as Cape Wom came into view and then disappeared under a cloud. Casually the pilot announced that we have an ETA of approximately thirty minutes and that we were descending to 500 feet. I recall seeing Aitape off in the distance as we followed the ring reef west and the Caribou was so low that it created a clear wake ripple in the flat Bismark Sea. I could see fishermen waving. Without warning the plane climbed, cleared the palm trees, and landed at Vanimo air strip.



The flight up to Vanimo takes about thirty minutes. The flight path hugs the coastline and offers great views of the reefs.

I was directed to my quarters adjacent to the Bar and I unpacked my kit, stepped out onto the verandah and scanned the bay. To the left in the distance was the Vanimo headland and town center and port. To the right, two small islands approximately two to three kilometres in the distance and what appeared to be a small village. To my immediate right was a small haus-wind and linking the entire scene was a narrow sandy strip of beach.



The Vanimo bay stretches out alongside the air strip. The Army base is nestled in between the airstrip and beach.

My class room was a small raised corrugated iron clad hut with steps, a single blackboard, a small press cupboard and several small desks and chairs. It was here that I was to teach English to my poor cadre who happened to not be on duty at the border, or on Patrol. We, as a class group, approached the learning task enthusiastically. One favourite was creative writing and our short stories recounting our experiences in the Balus, or "Life in my Village" were good fun. Occasionally, we did a little drama work and reading and acting out the short stories was a highlight.



Our classroom was a simple affair, corrugated iron cladding and open breezeway. Sgt John Humphrey waiting for this class.

One of the Duties I was assigned on arrival was that of Bar Tender – Warden. The stocktake was way out and the CO assigned me the task of doing a complete stocktake and ensuring that the correct accounting processes were followed. Someone, possibly a previous Chalkie, had developed a series of measuring devices (sticks of dowel rod) for each of the standard spirit bottles in the Bar – from Gilbeys Gin to Scotch, Rum and liqueurs. Each stick has a felt pen marker point for a nip. Each stick was labelled Gilbeys or Johnnie Walker Red etc. A foolscap page was ruled up with date and time and each morning after breakfast, I would account for the previous evening's efforts in the Bar.

Apparently the outgoing Bar Warden, a robust Sergeant from Ambunti on the Sepik, had acquired a taste for Drambuie. To this end we had several cases of Drambuie, some Rum, a few boxes of Greenies and little else. All was put right and we had the Bar back on track. With Anzac Day 1971 in Vanimo looming, we ensured that we were going to be able to manage the Day and at the going down of the sun.

The days drifted by. Time off often involved the lazing about in the bay on our blow up mattresses. The water was crystal clear, deep and very refreshing - given the humidity. Vanimo Army Barracks also hosted an Australian Signals group who maintained a hush hush bit of new equipment that we were told had something to do with the "over the horizon" radar being operated out of Darwin. It all sounded good. One of the Sigs had a talent for making radio controlled model aeroplanes. To his extreme pleasure, he enjoyed dive bombing us as we lay on our mattresses in the bay. Occasionally, a flight headed off to the horizon never to be seen again.



The days drift by, the Hercs arrive daily, the classroom work is exciting and the sun sets in Paradise.

A few weeks after my arrival in Vanimo, I was joined by Sgt Ian Taylor. He arrived on a Hercules along with our dirt bikes. The Hercs were amazing. They landed and then reversed across the tarmac into the camp and up to the Rations Store rooms where all cargo was then unloaded. The bikes brought freedom and in our time off we drove east down towards the twin island village and around the Vanimo Township. There were not too many roads. The most attractive one was the road leading west towards Wutung and the Border. We requested permission to go and see. This was approved as long as we wore Civvies and checked in at the Army Post at the Border site.



Vanimo Bay looking West and the jungle clad road up to Wutung and the Border Headland.

The road to Wutung was very pretty. As you left Vanimo it wound around the Western Bay and then on into the jungle clad hills. Occasionally you got a glimpse of the sea but for most of the way the road twisted and turned along the Coast. Finally, at the crest of a small hillock, the grand vista of Wutung village lay out before us with the Headland dominating the landscape, the headland marked the exact point on the border. The headland reminded me of the Burleigh Heads headland on the Gold Coast in shape. We made our way to the Wutung village passing by the neatly laid out refugee tent camp. We reported in to the Army Post, crossed the creek on foot and made our way to the Border on foot. The Border in 1971 consisted of a concrete survey marker and a sign announcing that you were about to enter Indonesia (several meters on). A lone PNG Policeman stood guard at the point.



The PNG Border Marker on the beach, the nearby burial cave on the Headland and the Refugee Camps at Wutung.

One evening in Vanimo, one of the PIR sergeants told me about a small burial cave located up the headland slope approximately 100 meters above the marker. So, cameras in hand, we headed up the hill, dodging the bracken fern and nettles. After about thirty minutes of climbing we came across a small series of caves set back into the hillside. We crawled into the largest and sure enough, there were many skeletons there. All had geometric incisions engraved into the skulls. Each skeleton was bundled and stuffed into fissures in the caves. We counted approximately six skulls in the cave we were in. The caves looked out to the sea. To our left, we could vaguely make out Duyrapura Township across the Hollandia Bay to the west.



Vanimo forty three years on ... the Westpac Bank and the Indonesian Border. A road now links Vanimo and Jayapura.

We made our retreat, back to the bikes and back to Vanimo. Today, the Border crossing is a highly organised and built environment. Today, Vanimo even has its own Indonesian Consulate Office for issuing Visas. Many people cross over, including tourists. The recollections I have of the small police and army office overlooking the creek and the winding pathway to the Border is far more romantic. The refugee camps are still there I am told.

I enjoyed my three months at Vanimo. Time passed quickly and it is probably one of the prettiest places I have spent time at ... and all expenses paid by the Government!

Rod Cassidy 2 PIR

A special thank you to Sgt. John Humphrey 2 PIR for some of his photographs and memories who also spent time in Vanimo in 1971.