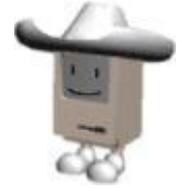


ADVENTURES OF COMPUTER SUPPORT IN THE KIMBERLEY (or I'll go anywhere, any time in any conditions)

On 7 April 2010, IT specialist Quentin Hall shared some tales and plenty of interesting photographs with the Kimberley Society. Quentin, who works out of Perth under the intriguing business name "Mac Malady", provided us with the summary below.



Years ago, when my father was still alive, he'd tell me about his trips to the North West with West Australian Newspapers back in the 1950s. In those days it took all day to get to Wyndham by MMA Fokker Friendship (or DC3) twin prop planes. You stopped at every major country town on the way up and back. I thought maybe one day maybe when I retired, that I might get up there myself.

My first trip "through" the Kimberley was just that - zooming anti-clockwise around Australia on a Greyhound bus back in 1985. After Darwin it was "keep going all the way - no stopping off in any town until I get back to Perth," due to having to be at a friend's wedding on time. I remember waiting by the side of the bus as I stretched my legs readying myself for the trip to the next town. I wouldn't be able to sit for that long now. The towns my father spoke of were still there, probably smaller than I thought as some were "Government Towns" where the services for that area were based. Some towns were only seen in the gloom of the street lamp surrounded by thousands of insects hell bent on breaking the light globe to bring back the darkness as the bus pulled in at 2 AM. I was hard pressed without looking at the timetable to know exactly what town I was in. Some didn't look that inviting in that light.

Roll forward until 1992.

I received a phone call from the Aboriginal Visitors Scheme for whom I'd been fixing computers in West Perth, "Expect a Howard to give you a call". Indeed a Howard (Pedersen) did ring. "Could you come up to Derby and have a look at what we want to do?". Wow! I'd never been asked to be flown up to somewhere before. I rang up one of my colleagues who worked at Curtin Computer shop to inform him that I might be calling on them for supply of goods. Surprisingly, he too had been rung to "come along". Within a week we were flown to Derby and picked up from the plane, an Ansett Airlines of Australia Fokker Fellowship, which, in those days, did land on the town strip. Our first port of call was the King Sound Hotel which I guess was still "fairly" new at that stage. We then headed to the Kimberley Land Council to talk to them and look over the job.

Computer firms had been quoting sums of money around \$10,000. For this they could get a single server, a printer and one or two workstations. With the Apple Macintosh computers and telephone wiring for networking, we could get four workstations (with any one being "a server" as well as a workstation), a network between them and a laser printer. They were amazed. In due course the order came and I spent most of a week wiring up the building for their network and all worked as stated "on the package". I thought at the time, "That was a nice job but I don't know if they'll have more work for me again". As the months passed, their offices increased in size and it was time for more computers and printers - oh, and could we have that new thing called "The Internet" and email between ourselves. So a dialup modem which dialled on "demand" was installed and I got them onto the Internet. Peter Yu was the CEO back then and found it was great to get the Eastern States newspapers "on-line" so he could comment when the Eastern States media rang him in the morning instead of waiting for "sometime in the afternoon" or even next day to get that newspaper for the full story.

As time went on, I was asked to install out at Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Kununurra as well as Wyndham. Broome came last - finally I'd have a chance to see this Broome place that all the northwesterners would flock for at any chance they could get. My view for most of the week was at the industrial area - I was in the flat attached to the building.

As most of these places didn't have really what you call a decent hotel or motel (or it was budget busting pricing for the client), I was often put up in someone's home. Sometimes I would camp out in the place I was working as many were converted homes, still complete with a working kitchen and bathroom - but most seemed to lack curtains - and cutlery.

As time went on I would get phone calls from a voice calling from "such and such" to drop in after you have finished down in Fitzroy Crossing. I would arrive in the required town by bus (normally at a hideously late hour) and be taken in a beat-up 4WD up to two or three hours "out from the town". These were my first visits to the real outback - to the schools of Yakanarra and Milligidee. Not

ever being on Aboriginal outstations before, I thought that the men were a bit rude by ignoring me with their eyes down to the ground, if I said, "Good morning," as I made my way around the community. I was later told by the teachers "don't worry - that's normal". Indeed, it was the women who "checked me out first" and by some unwritten and unsaid command, folk would chat to me – even if it was in Kriol that took a bit of getting my ear tuned in.

The teachers always seemed to originate from the most diagonally opposite places in Australia – so I mainly met Victorians. Living with a teacher (or the "Teacher/Principal" as that's all they had in the line of staff – one person) for up to a week, I certainly got to know a few folk. Support workers came and went and, not surprisingly, it wasn't long until I got to know a good number of colourful Kimberley characters. Sometimes I would arrive and be told from a complete stranger, "You must be Quentin, you're coming over for dinner with me tonight." I wouldn't know who they were OR where they lived. It all worked out. My first dinner like this we had roast wallaby – road kill at that. It was tasty and there were lots of vegetables so it was better than I could have cooked myself.

I soon got used to the idea that, "if you didn't bring it – make do with what you have with you – or do without". That applied to food. One teacher said, "plenty in my cupboard, you don't need anything". Funny, about 100 cans of fish – the one main food that I can't stomach – taught me, "next time to bring out all your food". Often my tools would be shipped up road freight in advance, with me following up straight after school holidays (for the schools) and hitch a lift with one of the teachers, their dogs, their equipment and whoever else had to head back to the community. Needless to say it was "cosy" in the back of the "troopies". How many times did I hear, "sorry about the air-conditioning – it broke down a couple of months ago". It would be November and I would just sit and sweat in the back. One trip we took turns in a completely overfilled troopie to lay on the bed which was at the top of the goods, with your nose about 100 mm from the roof.

I also got used to the power dropping out – from the generators suddenly "running out of diesel" – and once, after the generators failed, the entire community had left. The head teacher and I arrived at a dark community at 7 PM, to find only barking dogs, no water and no phones. It took two days to get the engineers out to fix the faulty generator so there really wasn't much a computer technician could do without power. Once, I just couldn't sleep, so I finished the job at 3 AM. As the teachers came in at 7 AM, I was going to show them how the entire system worked – when the generators stopped for 30 hours. Hardly ever has the planned time up there actually gone "to plan". At one stage I could be away for up to six weeks (after estimating two weeks, they found a few more items for me to do) whilst I went from a K.L.C. branch, to a school, to the Kimberley Language Centre or even the Kununurra Echo. Always late nights and early starts – I was working harder than I would in Perth due to time restraints.

On one job in Fitzroy Crossing, I couldn't finish as some conduit hadn't arrived. The shipping firm had no idea where it was (which still happens to this day) so I thought I would move on to Halls Creek instead, to the Language Centre job. We needed some conduit there too, just a metre or two, and Anna suggested I went to the local electrician on the main street. "No, none of that stuff here, mate," was the answer, "However, we got some shipment for a Quentin Hall, C/- Yakanarra School via Fitzroy Crossing" – you might use some of his – we have no idea who he is!". It was about 200 km incorrectly delivered. I was heading BACK to Fitzroy Crossing that night in a chap's car, so we tried to squeeze this conduit inside his vehicle. It was too long so the 4-metre lengths were all chopped to two metres, which made my job at Fitzroy Crossing a LOT harder and took at least three times as long to install.

As I've mentioned, I have normally been driven out to various destinations in grossly overloaded vehicles which are about to fall apart (or in one case, had already), but occasionally the weather is against you and flying is the only way in or out. Once from Broome, I had all my tools (which couldn't get out to Fitzroy Crossing due to flooding and were in storage in Broome), a wiring cabinet, a teacher's "Bale Sale" of second-hand clothing from a charity shop for the community members, wiring, conduit and things like food required for a few weeks' stay. We arrived at the airport and were shown to the light plane, a Cessna 4-seater, single engine. The pilot had one look at all of our gear and asked, "What could you do without?". The teacher said that her own clothes bag could be left as she had more clothes at the school house. That didn't help that much. The pilot opened the side hatch and soon filled that nook. He opened up the plane and started stuffing everything inside. He unloaded it again and said, "We are taking out one of the rear seats – you get inside first". So seated on the remaining seat, I was given the other seat (inverted) which was placed on my lap whilst the remaining gear was placed inside the aircraft. Maybe the word "squeezed" rather than placed should have been used here. The pilot took the controls and we

started our taxi out – just as he spotted the Department of Transport boys who had just arrived. He waved to them as they taxied off the runway and we took our position. We took the entire runway before he had the speed for take-off and banked towards Roebuck Bay. It seem to take forever to cross over the bay as we had a stiff Easterly wind. My fellow passenger, as she said would happen and didn't disappoint, was promptly air-sick. However, the countryside from the air is just brilliant.

Sleeping arrangements have always been varied. "We have plenty of beds and sheets" often becomes, after arriving, "Gee, I don't know where they have all gone – there was a new bed in here yesterday!". So I've slept on the floor, on jumping mats, out on the lawn. Once I even had the honour, however, to be in a brand NEW house. Most times it was a visitors house which I could get bumped out from if a family was coming through. I often ended up in the school house which, without curtains made it feel like I was in a goldfish bowl. I had to get up early as the students would appear at the windows, looking in from 6 AM - apparently not knowing what the time was but as it was light it must be ABOUT school time. I had to be up and dressed before their young faces appeared at my "bedroom" window. One location (the old hostel at Fitzroy Crossing) had an outside shower block which had a covered walkway. One night I had to go to the toilet and found the entire inside of the toilet covered with little green tree frogs. I carefully lifted the seat and the next thing I was "attacked" by a frog who decided to jump from the toilet roll onto - well, you can guess where on my person. It certainly woke me from my dreamy state.

Often after working for a week solid including weekends, as what do you do other than work when the TV is only WIN and a static filled ABC, folk would often take pity on me. "Have the afternoon off and go with the school mob and teachers on a field trip for the afternoon." I was always thankful for this as I got to see things I would never have known existed. Who would have thought a cool rock pool would exist after a 40-minute drive over completely flat, dry and dusty terrain? I had to rub a rock under my armpit and then throw it into the rock pool so the "serpent" of the pool knew I was a friend and not to attack me. Often I would be then told about a story of some poor unfortunate children who, in the dreamtime at least, were "taken" by the serpent. Fearful school children around would make sure that I had a rock to use. All apparently "knew" the children who had been "taken". I wasn't eaten so there are a few rock pools up there where I'll always be welcomed if I could only remember where they were!

Another "famous" trip was out from Halls Creek to Wolfe Creek Crater. Joe Blythe from the Language Centre had his arm in a sling, so couldn't drive. That was left up to me. As Joe hadn't quite finished the rebuild of his 4WD, the gearbox cover on the inside floor pan had not been refitted and looked somewhat like Fred Flintstone's car. With us on the trip was a new linguist – not surprisingly from Victoria – who worked for the Language Centre. To round off the crew was Joe's absolutely tough "Halls Creek" dog and an old Aboriginal fellow called Jack who had been a police tracker in his day. Jack wanted a couple of meat pies for his lunch and the rest of us selected sandwiches at the local roadhouse before we set off. The heat! Again no air conditioning and a constant blast furnace of hot air streaming into the car off the hot road straight through the missing floor pan. On the turn-off we came across a family who had been stranded for quite some time (no tourists at this time of year). They had punctured their last spare tyre and would we mind if we "broke the bead" on a couple of their tyres by driving over the edge of their rims. They would fill them with a good packing of spinifex which would hold out until they got to Alice Springs. We complied and stopped awhile to talk. When we got back to our parked 4WD, old Jack was delighted to tell us that he'd "cleaned the inside of Joe's car". He certainly had. All the lolly wrappers, choc milk cartons, drink cans etc., had been thrown out on the side of the bush track. Off we continued to Wolfe Creek Crater. The last 200 metres was on some very rough road which ended up with the cattle grate sticking up some 200 mm in the air, which I didn't see until we hit it at a reasonable clip. The 4WD bumped up, landed on the front wheels, and the rear wheels crashed down.

What I could see in the rear vision mirror went like this. Joe's dog was now airborne in the rear compartment, closely followed underneath by the large steel "kangaroo" car jack. Gravity took over, both car jack and dog fell, when there was an almighty explosion. The heavy car jack had struck a can of aerosol spray oil which then ruptured – the contents covering Joe's dog and making a complete mist in the car within seconds. At this moment the dust came up from the missing floor pan and mixed with the oil mist. Everything and everyone was covered in a red dust and oil mix but none so much as Joe's dog who had changed from mainly a black coloured dog to red in a few seconds. We still enjoyed ourselves and Jack announced he'd have his other pie for

dinner that night which would have made it nearly 12 hours since the pie came out of the pie warmer. He must have had a cast iron stomach.

There is one other story involving me driving a 4WD troopie full of people from Broome to Halls Creek. The Language Centre had arranged a conference in Broome at the School Camp. On the Friday afternoon it finished and a very pregnant girl, who worked for the Language Centre, drove for the first part of the trip to Willare Bridge. She was obviously very uncomfortable and asked if I could drive on. Evening was coming, so on went the lights. Each light pointed in a different direction but none of them "straight ahead". Without tools, that was as good as it got for night vision. The steering was very light on the front and wandered if you approached 100 kph. The other, newer troopie had left us for dead, having roared off into the night with Anna Mardling at the wheel. She knew the road very well. Finally at about midnight we arrived into Halls Creek. I shouted over my shoulder to the mob in the back, "Please direct me to your houses so I can drop you off." I was guided to the first house. "Who's next?" A voice answered and guided me to the other side of Halls Creek. "Now, who's next?" Another voice guided me BACK to where I had been earlier, say but for one street. This went on as I emptied the troopie. I asked, "Is there anyone ELSE for this side of the town?". It made no difference, there was a definite pecking order that folk had to get dropped off. Apparently it was only myself who couldn't work out the drop off order. "Silly white fella".

Some of the sickest I've ever been (including my visit to India) has happened whilst I've been out in the Kimberley. Fevers, food poisoning (which had me sleep straight for nearly 20 hours) have been amongst the maladies suffered. On one trip, I had a then girlfriend – a GP who had come along for the trip and to run a few medical clinics – end up administering wonder drugs to me. Picking through the limited medicine cabinet and ignoring the expired "use by date", she said, "These will help." Sure enough after being as sick as a dog, within four hours I started to feel better. I asked her, "What the heck were those tablets? They were magic". The answer wasn't what I expected. It was a STD antibiotic – one of the strong ones which just happened to also target the bug she'd worked out I had picked up. Being sick up North isn't much fun. I've seen folk driven for hours to get to an airstrip so the flying doctor could get out to them – or in urgent cases when the airstrip was not rated for night landings, folk driven at midnight to the nearest town with a hospital. Something that city folk cannot even consider. They might "give" to a charity tin of the Royal Flying Doctor, but they have no idea.

Work would normally involve some dangerous practice – only dangerous as the item to make it safe just wasn't available, nor would it be possible to source one. Things like a decent long ladder to get on the roof to put up an aerial would be no longer in the community. "It's over at such and such community – they needed it about a year ago." So I would have to work out a way of getting both myself, the tools and the aerial up on the roof as safely as I could. Sometimes it was climb a metal post, or a piece of playground equipment dragged across the community to the roof. Others it was drive a 4WD and park close to the house and then get the longest ladder they DID have (normally less than 5 foot) and put this on the roof rack. I was once told of a LONG ladder under a house. It was eventually found (under a different house). I dragged it out from between the dogs camped there to discover, only after brushing off the years of accumulated mud, that the white ants had finished a section of rungs off the ladder. Other than the 1.5 metres of chewed section, it was otherwise in fine condition. Armed with some scrap pine wood thrown from a house that had been built some months earlier and a "screw gun", I made a splint which saved the day.

Interesting phone calls have often been answered when no one else was around to answer. There you are working on a late Saturday afternoon and the school phone rings. You answer it, as it could be a teacher saying, "Come over for dinner tonight" or "We are going for an afternoon walk – do you wish to come along?". Once it was Telstra about the faulty satellite dish. They were following up people who had experienced problems and we'd waited all week to hear back. Now on a Saturday late PM, you wouldn't expect a school to have someone still working away in the school to even answer the phone. Another common one was a distant voice who would ask, "Can I speak to Benjie?". "I'm sorry", I would answer, "but I'm a visitor here myself and I'm not sure of whom you are speaking." The voice would come booming back, "Benjie! The one at the top camp – you must know him – he has a big mob of family there and the white Toyota." The voice has just described at least 10 houses that I had seen in the community during my stay.

Even though your food was, "Yours – we all have got our own, thanks", it was always amazing how I would only consume about 1/3 of what I had purchased. Chocolate stood no chance of being hidden – it was sniffed out by the female teachers. Fresh vegetables brought in from Broome – a

week's worth devoured in one night. One memorable day, all the teachers got together one Sunday morning for a most wonderful breakfast. Pancakes (with real Canadian maple syrup from a 5-gallon container shipped out by the chap's parents), homemade yoghurt and endless coffee and great conversation filled that morning with the desert views.

Some of the nicest folk I've met have been from up this way. Even today, I will still go and meet up with them, even though they may have moved to the other side of the world, or I'll offer up a bed as they come through as they did for me when I was up that way.

I don't travel up that way nearly as often as I did in the late 1990s as most computers are now such that they "just keep working" until the day they completely fail. Most have seen their budgets slashed or maybe the community downsize as folk come and go. I've always treated the trips as an adventure. Where am I going to sleep? How am I getting from A to B? Am I going to make the plane on time? What could I use around me from the junk pile to make this work? What has happened to that "urgent-super-express-next-day-delivery" item?

Something in the city that you wouldn't even think about or, if you did, a cold sweat would fill your brow – closely followed with the thought, "That COULDN'T possibly happen. Just put it out of your head". Up there, you shrug your shoulders and say, "Well, that's the Kimberley for you, get on with it."