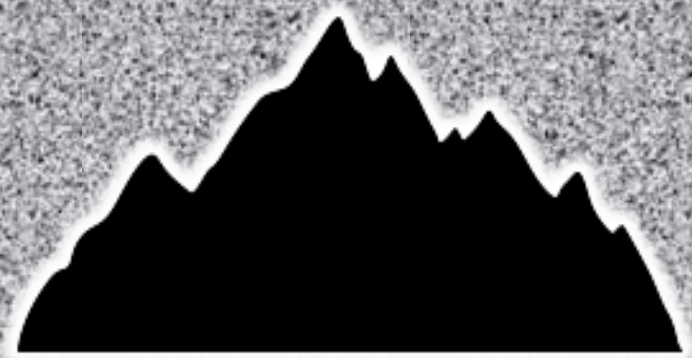
FROM ARABIAN OASES TO PERUVIAN PEAKS

Ten years in the life of a construction expat



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Contents

Introduction

In my construction career, I have had plenty to write about. I was the lead construction planner on the first air-rights building in the City of London (Alban Gate), later becoming the only expatriate employed as an advisor at the head office of the Malaysian Government client organisation responsible for the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport. More recently I was the client's lead planner for the design and early construction activity for the multi-billion-pound Terminals 5 and 2 at Heathrow Airport. In 2006, I was offered a contract to manage the planning and logistics of the foundations and service diversions for One World Trade Centre (Freedom Tower) after 9/11. I had a US green card at that time, but not feeling up to dealing with militant construction worker unions and criminal gangs, declined the offer after visiting New York. But instead of focussing on the above projects, I have recorded the ten years of my career when I was a young and naïve site engineer, learning about the world, taking risks, and making mistakes and errors of judgement as I tried to survive.

The UK construction industry in the early 1970's faced several challenges. A massive programme of infrastructure construction was winding down: the wave of AGR nuclear power stations was almost at an end, the Victoria Line for London Underground had just opened, and 1,000 miles of motorways had been completed, but further large infrastructure contracts were now thin on the ground. The 1970's in the UK saw great industrial unrest, fuel shortages and protests. Much of the Western world entered a recession in 1973 which lasted for over two years.

The traditional practice of travelling workers and staff employed directly by the major contractors was being replaced by local, often poorly trained, labour. The shortage of skilled workers was, however, to some extent mitigated by the recently arrived Asian immigrant workforce.

The industry needed to find work outside the UK and followed the money to the Middle East, Hong Kong, recently independent Commonwealth countries and major International Monetary Fund projects in developing countries. A “golden period” of overseas work in the mid to late 70’s came to a halt in the early 80’s as many construction companies retrenched, finding that the fierce overseas competition and the attitude of many overseas clients who were averse to claims, even if justified, made work unprofitable.

It was in these challenging times that I commenced a career which was full of adventure, danger and excitement. Not everyone survived those times in the construction industry: health and safety regulations were much less onerous than is now the case and the long working hours, a stressful environment, poor pay and several major recessions also took their toll. The overseas work frequently involved more danger and risky situations than anyone could have foreseen. Somehow, I survived to tell the tales of my three overseas postings and related travel. I was certainly lucky on occasions, but I like to think that I sometimes made my own luck. The following memoir is accurate to the best of my memory, but it is well known that two people can have completely different memories of the same event. In some cases, I have substituted names to protect those who I may have inadvertently slandered. It is hoped that the following chapters will provide an insight into what working in the construction industry could be like at the time when I started my career.

1. Paving the way

I've worked till the sweat it has had me beat
With Russian, Czech, and Pole
On shuttering jams up in the hydro-dams
Or underneath the Thames in a hole
I've grafted hard and I've got my cards
And many a ganger's fist across my ears
If you pride your life don't join, by Christ!
With McAlpine's fusiliers

McAlpine's Fusiliers by Dominic Behan

As I stopped at one of the numerous sets of traffic lights, I surveyed the scene. Wherever I looked there were factory sheds, chemical plants, flues and chimneys. In these places, smoke rose in a curl and then drifted in the wind, penetrating the haze: thick black smoke, brown wispy smoke, yellow sulphurous choking smoke and grey-white ash and steam forming cumulous clouds. This was truly the iron heart of England – how impressive it looked. I was on my way to my first full time job, working for the Highways Division in Wolverhampton for Tarmac Construction. Crossing the Black Country on the Birmingham New Road, I wondered what lay in store.[1]

I had always wanted to work on big engineering projects. My favourite book as a child was "The Wonder Book of Engineering Wonders" and I looked at the pictures of magnificent bridges, roads, railways, airports and dams. I wanted to be a part of that. However, that vision nearly came to grief when I messed up my A level exams and failed to get into university.[2] In those days, only about ten per cent of school leavers went to "University". There were, of course

[1] Strictly speaking, the Black Country consists of West Bromwich, Oldbury, Blackheath, Cradley Heath, Old Hill, Bilston, Dudley, Tipton, Wednesfield and parts of Halesowen, Wednesbury and Walsall. Nowadays, it is often used to refer to all areas to the north-west of Birmingham.

[2] I was suffering from SIBO with brain fog and fatigue when revising.

polytechnics and colleges of further education, but these did not count as universities. But most boys from my school went to "University" and the words of the chorus of the school song came to mind:

> Forward, where the knocks are hardest, some to failure, some to fame:
> Never mind the cheers or hooting, keep your head and play the game.

I was certainly not going to be famous. Needing to find a job, I went to a job interview at British Industrial Plastics in Tat Bank, which is a district within Oldbury, or Warley as the area had been renamed. As I left Langley Green station and walked to the plastics company offices, I could barely see more than twenty yards ahead through the sulphurous haze, following Victorian brick walls and crossing the Tat Bank branch of the cyanide polluted Titford canal. The job entailed testing plastic components in a laboratory. I did not like the thought of spending the rest of my life noting down test results and was relieved when Birmingham's City Careers Officer accepted my mother's appointment to see me, finding me a suitable sandwich civil engineering course at the North East London Polytechnic in Walthamstow, East London.

Three years on, in the early Summer of 1971, I had now qualified with a diploma in Highway Engineering and had been offered a job by Tarmac, one of Britain's major civil engineering contractors, their name alluding to the fact that they also had a separate division which undertook paving roads. After a mere two weeks, I transferred from the Highways Division to the Industrial Division which had a vacancy for a site engineer in Wolverhampton, the same town as the location of their head office.

Working from a site office which was a mouse-infested shed, the incinerator project was a good induction to the hardships of site life. The local MP was Enoch Powell, a man who had attended the same school as me and complied with the school song "…some to fame". He may have been a famous and hard-working MP, but there

were many who regarded him as infamous. On site, there were a number of newly arrived construction workers from Pakistan, who, speaking mainly Punjabi, would huddle around a fire of burning scrap formwork in the cool autumn mornings before starting work. It was the “school of hard knocks” with few “Pleases” or “Would you minds?”. Instead, it was “If that setting out isn’t ready in five minutes, you will be down the road”. We engineers were constantly on edge, in fear of the bullying construction manager and trying to keep ahead of the work on site.

After six months, I was transferred to a project to build the new Ford Transit van factory at a former Spitfire aircraft factory in Swaythling, Southampton. Initially working long hours, six and a half days a week, I was exhausted most evenings, and had little time for leisure although I did manage to meet some girls at dancing lessons. This was very necessary as, being painfully shy, I was unable to summon the courage to chat with the office-based girls on site. I stayed at the factory site long enough to see the first production Transit van roll off the assembly line in February 1973. It was fortuitous that at that time, Tarmac was awarded another contract in the naval dockyard in the nearby city of Portsmouth and that is where I was posted in the early Spring of 1973.

Portsmouth had suffered badly from bombing in the second world war. There were still vast areas which needed to be rebuilt, whilst rows of sub-standard housing were also being cleared from the second most densely populated city in the UK (central London held the top spot). A new Brutalist shopping centre (you either liked or hated it), The Tricorn Centre, marked the regeneration, but as it was unconnected to the main shopping area, it was not greatly used. The dockyard is situated near the south-western tip of Portsea Island, so to arrive or leave, it was necessary drive the length of the run down and largely derelict city. Immediately to the west of the dockyard, was the pleasant and attractive resort of Southsea, looking incongruous with its Edwardian houses, hotels and promenade. It was in Southsea where I found digs, within walking distance of the sea front.

I was aware that there was enmity between Southampton and Portsmouth which surfaced from time to time, with disparaging comments and violence if football was involved. Just forty kilometres apart, hundreds of years of inter-city conflict have led to more bad feeling between the two cities than perhaps any others in the UK, thus requiring that I transfer my allegiance in soccer from the Southampton FC Saints to Pompey as Portsmouth FC are known.

Setting out the massive heavy plate shop was not easy, for the simple reason that within its boundary was another large factory building which had to be demolished and which crossed the perimeter of the new plate shop. Behind the existing building was the old sawmills, which contained a large pile of baulk timbers used to support the keels and bilges of ships in dry dock and to act as props. Many of the ships in the Royal Navy have their own designated timbers which are unique to that ship and a particular dry dock. As one might expect in a dockyard, cats had been brought in at one time to catch the rats which are always found near ships. These cats had now become feral cats, the cats and their kittens living in vast numbers among the pieces of timber.

I was unable to “close” the setting out of the new heavy plate shop facility for at least six months, until the old factory had been demolished. During this time, the piling works started as did clearance of underground services. There are legendary stories, within the construction industry, of setting out mistakes. When at Southampton, I had been sent to Cardiff for a week to take over from the senior engineer there, who was going on his annual leave. The project was a new office block and piling works were well underway. He suggested I check the setting out, which I did, discovering that everything was 3 inches (75mm) out, as he had missed a crucial dimension on one of the setting out plans. The tolerance on the piles themselves was the same amount, so anything out of tolerance in the wrong direction would have to be corrected by designing a special pile cap, possibly needing additional piles. The news I gave him must have spoilt his holiday. Stories were told among us engineers of a new road across moorland, where the surveyor had miscalculated by 180 degrees and the road

had been constructed in the wrong direction. There were, of course, no GPS, laser equipment or other modern aids in those days and it was quite easy to make setting out mistakes.

I was, therefore, naturally nervous about setting out the plate shop, without being able to locate the four corners and check that everything tied in. I had to use log tables, cosines and formulae and using my slide rule, checked my college notes to work out angles to use on the theodolite to fix certain points. None of the other engineers could help me as they had not encountered this situation before and had forgotten any learning from their college days. The existing building, which interrupted my line of sight, was being demolished by a group of nine scrap merchant brothers from Southampton, who posed as demolition contractors. They concentrated on stripping copper and other valuable metal as a priority, instead of working in a manner to help our construction sequence. Large steel beams would crash to the ground from time to time and it was necessary to be very aware of potential annihilation whenever there was burning gear being used in the vicinity where one was walking. On the other side of the plate shop was the cat infested sawmill yard. I had to measure distances across this using the tape in a series of loops and apply a catenary (sag) correction together with other correction factors. This involved knowing the difference in ground levels, tape tension, air temperature, etc. and it would be easy to apply a correction factor incorrectly such as a minus instead of a plus and if the tape were not completely straight or the chain-boy held the end of the tape at the wrong mark, distances could easily be mis-measured. Then in addition, there were potential errors in reading the theodolite or possible instrument errors. I checked and re-checked my measurements but was far from confident in the accuracy of my setting out.

Finally, the day arrived when the last part of the former shed structure was to be removed. I waited anxiously behind my theodolite, having sent a chainman to hold a pencil on the setting out point which up to now had been hidden behind the remnants of the shed. I was a bag of nerves – an error of one inch (2.5cm) was just about acceptable,

as I could take out the error by slightly adjusting each corner. Slightly more and the pile caps might have to be redesigned and additional piles bored. More than about three inches (75mm), and I was in trouble – the piling might have to be undertaken again at huge expense with a delay to the project of perhaps three months. If this were the case, I would have to slink away to my digs and leave town. It might well spell the end of my brief career as a site engineer. As the last piece of structure crashed to the ground and was cleared away, I peered through the theodolite. Where was the pencil? Instead, I saw the wheel of a stationary motorbike! I could not believe it. The motorbike had broken down at exactly the moment I was looking through the theodolite. It took the motorcyclist a good three minutes to restart the bike, but it seemed like hours. I heard a voice behind me "These things always happen just when you don't want them!". It was the young resident engineer, Tom, out on his daily walk around. This just upped the pressure – he might witness my last act on a construction site. At last, I was able to look through the theodolite lens again, seeing the reassuring sight of a yellow pencil in the crosshairs. I tried to look nonchalant as I turned to Tom and said, "Spot on, I am within an eighth of an inch (3mm) in closing".

My main "project" as a section engineer was the construction of a large new service tunnel containing pipes for steam, water, gas, drainage and electricity cables. Before excavation commenced, it was my job to ensure that any live or redundant services were located and made safe. I had a rudimentary metal detector, but one of the problems I encountered was interference from the rail tracks which were situated within the paved surface of the dockyard. I had to get sufficiently far away from these rails to avoid false readings, any pipe or cable more than a few feet below the surface giving only the most minute deflection on the gauge. I spent hours combing the area, trying to detect the slightest indication of something metallic below the surface. Fortunately, my protracted efforts were generally successful. Excavations to find the buried pipe or cable were initiated by excavator and then continued by hand digging. If we found a cable, this had to be spiked to ensure it did not carry any current and this involved firing

a large nail or spike through the cable. This was not entirely without risk, although Ron, the Clerk of Works, did his best to identify if the cables were live. However, if a cable was unexpectedly found to be live, there could be a flash, or the gun could blow up, potentially injuring the person firing the cable spiker gun and cutting off the critical electrical supply to part of the dockyard. The cables were usually dead, but all concerned held their breath whenever such an operation was undertaken. However, on one occasion, a workman who was using a pick for the hand excavation went through a live cable, being thrown backwards but escaping without serious injury. After he had recovered from the shock, he showed off the end of the pick which was plated with molten copper; he was a lucky man.

The driver of the hydraulic excavator which we used had been specially requested by our construction superintendent, George, who had a good (some might say incestuous) relationship with the hire company. The Hymac excavator operator was a very experienced and skilled operator who knew all the tricks of the trade, but he was a bit of a rogue. He worked very fast and therefore frequently had some "spare time" when there were no trenches to be excavated or pits to be dug. He used this time to assist the demolition contractor in extracting redundant copper high voltage electricity cables, pulling them from out of the ground with the excavator bucket. No doubt, the retrieval of all this copper was very profitable for both him and the demolition contractor. One day it went wrong. He started to pull a redundant cable when suddenly a dockyard worker rushed towards the service tunnel yelling frantically. The cable was dead, but it was still attached to a live switch panel in a nearby substation and a startled worker who was in the substation at the time suddenly found the switch panel sliding across the floor, giving him the fright of his life. The excavator operator was eventually banned from the dockyard when the dockyard police checked his car as he was leaving one day and found stolen petrol in a can.

There was another rogue working on the site who actually confided in me regarding his criminal activities. At night, he would go diving with an accomplice. The purpose of these dives was to cut off

and salvage the bronze propellers of ships which had been anchored in the harbour, waiting for a relief crew or to be scrapped. This was difficult and hazardous work, and the man obviously felt great pride in achieving his mission. The ship owners would discover several months later that their vessel had no means of propulsion!

Ken, a foreman from County Durham, with whom I had worked closely in Southampton, arrived after about a few months and we resumed our partnership, this time working on the service tunnel. I planned the work, ordered materials and undertook all the setting out, levels and checks that the concrete pours had the right inserts and boxouts. All went well and proceeded as planned except for one incident. A drainage pipe needed to be laid in the gap between the service tunnel and the plate shop foundations. The sides of the trench for this pipe were supported by pushing in trench sheets which were then braced with wooden props. An Irish ganger and his mate were working down the trench, which was for a brief time unsupported over the newly excavated length, whilst the props were inserted. The ground next to the service tunnel was loose gravel and the two men had a narrow escape when part of the unpropped trench collapsed. Nowadays, there are systems which can be installed without the need to send men into an unsafe excavation and safety is very high on the agenda, largely because a director of a company can be held responsible. In those days, it was quite common to prosecute supervisors and as the section engineer, I could have been fined, or even imprisoned, if found to be responsible for any deaths or injuries. Causing anyone's death would be enough to haunt one for the rest of one's life.

My other "project" was a reconstructed ring road from Unicorn Gate to a point near the naval prison where it connected to the main dockyard road. This went very well, Tarmac being congratulated by the client for opening the new road ahead of the planned date. One day, I got into conversation with a passing matelot, and I asked him if the prison was used much. "Yes", he replied, "In fact, I make a point of getting sent there about once a year to toughen up". Apparently, there was a hard, physical exercise regime within its walls.

Storm clouds gathered, heralding difficult economic times which impacted on many people, the nation still being gripped by industrial unrest which had led to frequent power cuts whilst I was at Southampton. Early in 1973 the UK had joined the "Common Market" without any fanfare or fuss; it was, after all, just a free trade zone at that time. Overseas events added to the level of unrest at home and the end of 1973 saw a conflict in the ever-volatile Middle East, in the shape of the Arab Israeli war. Before it was over, battalions of tanks, hundreds of aircraft, and legions of soldiers would clash in one of the late 20th-century's most momentous wars, even though it lasted only a month. There was the threat of nuclear weapons (by Israel) who were attacked by both Egypt on one side and Syria on the other. Oil prices began to soar to unprecedented heights resulting in a petrol shortage and the unprepared British Government issued petrol ration books, which had been printed at the time of the Suez crisis in 1957 and had not been used then. In 1974, long queues developed outside petrol stations, many of them rationing the petrol (by gallons or by price as I do not believe the coupons were ever actually used). A three-day week was introduced, but as we worked in the dockyard, we were exempt and continued as normal.

In my position as section engineer, I reported to a senior engineer, the occupants of this position changing quite frequently. The third person to take up this role was Bob who was in his early thirties and had just returned from overseas, excitedly telling us what a great time he had enjoyed. I was hooked on the idea of working abroad and later that year, I applied and was granted an interview at Tarmac Overseas' New Cavendish Street offices, not far from Oxford Street, London. After being asked a few basic questions, I was then told about the project. It was on Das Island, an Emirati island in the sweltering and humid Persian Gulf, lying about 100 miles (160 km) north-west of the U.A.E. mainland. This rectangular island, about one kilometre wide by two and a half kilometres long, is completely covered by crude oil and liquefied natural gas installations with nowhere to go except when allowed off the island briefly every six weeks or so. This was not exactly what I had in mind for an overseas adventure, and I turned it down,

fearing that I might not have another opportunity to work abroad with Tarmac.

As 1974 came towards a close, there were more woes: strikes galore, IRA bombings on the UK mainland, a general election and a hung Parliament, a massive explosion at a chemical plant, and 16% inflation. My salary, without the tax-free subsistence allowance, which was about another £900, was under £2000 a year (about £16,500 at 2017 values) and was not increasing with inflation. The elderly Mini which enabled me to get around was packing up, the starter motor, hydrolastic suspension and bodywork all needing replacement. I had wanted to buy a second-hand red Triumph GT6 sports car which was on sale at a garage near my digs, but my low wages, which seemed to be dwindling every day, ruled this out.

With the modest salaries on offer and arduous working hours, there was, therefore, quite naturally, a shortage of construction site engineers, despite the low level of construction activity at that time. Tarmac decided that rather than raise the salaries of site staff, which would erode the company profit margins, they would import engineers from India, at salaries which the Indians thought generous by their standards, little realising the cost of living on the UK. Their training ground was to be the Portsmouth Dockyard project, and I and the other section engineer, Chris, who were short staffed and under pressure, had to check that these new arrivals were up to the mark and help them to perform efficiently. Three of the new recruits were dispatched back to India within the first three weeks as either incompetent or unable to adapt to our cultural practices (e.g., they expected someone to carry their optical surveying instruments). That left two, one of whom survived for two or three months, and the other, a guy called Ajit. The latter was a star – hard working, adaptable, friendly and willing to integrate with us. He was treated just like the other engineers and joined in our social life.

Perhaps to lessen my disappointment of not driving a sports car, I took up shooting. In the school CCF (Combined Cadet Force), I had fired .22 and .303 calibre rifles and even machine guns at some of the army and marine camps we visited. I joined the South Hants Rifle

and Pistol Club where members allowed their prized firearms to be used by other members, enabling me to fire an elephant pistol, a massive firearm capable of killing an elephant and with a recoil and noise to match its size. I was encouraged to buy my own pistol which would have to be transported in a locked container to and from the club, but I never got around to making the purchase, owing to the uncertainty over the length of my remaining stay in Portsmouth. Since that time, regulations have been tightened up considerably following a few high-profile cases such as the Dunblane shootings.

One day, Ron, the Clerk of Works on our construction site, took me on a tour of some of the historic dockyard facilities, pointing out machinery dating from the late 1890's. He told me that we needed to check the measurements of the holding down bolts for casting in the new machine bases and I naturally looked puzzled, hardly expecting that this equipment would be installed in the brand-new plate shop. Ron explained, that of course, the modern laser cutters and the like could produce five times the output but that it had been impossible to negotiate a deal with the unions who expected bonus productivity payments to remain as they were. Therefore, the old equipment would have to be used. Such practices were the writing on the wall for British industry.

Thoughts turned to the next project as the heavy plate shop neared completion. I was going through a tough time personally, having pulled out of an engagement when I realised that my fiancée's parents intended to control our lives. The sense of impending doom was heightened by the fact that there was little work on offer, other than the project Tarmac had recently won at Seal Sands. Those that knew the north-east of England, would grimace when this project was mentioned, Seal Sands being located on the coast, between Redcar and Hartlepool, two deprived areas. The project required the construction of chemical loading tanks and facilities in a very exposed location, which endured the bitter winds sweeping in from the North Sea. "Monkeys go there!" I was told. Not understanding this reference, I asked what was meant by this mention of a monkey.

A French ship was spotted floundering and sinking off the Hartlepool coast during the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century. Suspicious of enemy ships and a possible invasion, the folk of Hartlepool rushed down to the beach, where amongst the wreckage of the ship, they found the only survivor, the ship's monkey which was apparently dressed in a miniature military-style uniform. Most of the local population had never met, or even seen, a Frenchman, but some satirical cartoons of the time pictured the French as monkey-like creatures with tails and claws. The monkey was tried as a spy, found guilty and taken into the town square and hanged. Or so the legend goes, as no-one can be sure if it is true.

I was naturally less than enthusiastic about being relocated to this project. My Welsh friend and fellow section engineer, Chris, decided that it was time to leave the construction industry and told me that he was considering joining the police force. I decided to remain in construction and await my fate, knowing that the dire economic situation which the country faced had led to a dearth of major construction projects. As I pondered my future, I took a couple of days leave which was due, as I had worked some weekends and had earned these days to take off in lieu. It was on Thursday 21st November 1974 that I returned to my parent's house in Birmingham to spend a few days there.

That Thursday afternoon, at about four-thirty in the afternoon, I received a phone call from my friend David, who was an accountant working locally in "Brum" as Birmingham is colloquially known. He suggested we meet up after he had finished work at a venue which was unfamiliar to me. He mentioned that it was a pub called the Mulberry Bush and was situated near the base of the famous Rotunda building in New Street. We could have a pie and a drink there. It must have been about half past five as I was about to leave when the phone rang again. "Sorry", he told me, but "something has come up and we will have to cancel". It was going to be a boring evening I thought, as I now had to attend to the preparation of my evening meal. After eating dinner, I checked what programmes were on TV and settled down to watch. It must have been about 8:45pm when the programme I was

watching was interrupted by a newsflash with live footage from the scene of a bombing. Bodies slung in sheets were being loaded into an ambulance. I stared at the TV screen in horror – this was in New Street and the two pubs which had been bombed were the Tavern in the Town and The Mulberry Bush. Everyone in the vicinity had either been killed or injured, with 21 deaths and nearly 200 people injured, many maimed, disfigured and traumatised for life.

The hairdresser whose services I sometimes used in Birmingham, a guy called Willie, had been promoting IRA views to his customers and he locked up his salon and disappeared immediately after this event. It wasn't a good idea to be obviously Irish in Birmingham after that, let alone an IRA sympathiser. But I had little time to dwell on what might have been at that time. It was only years afterwards, when I visited St Philip's churchyard in 2015, that I looked at the names of the 21 who had died on the memorial there, half expecting to see my name among them.[3]

Figure 1 The Mulberry Bush pub after the bombing (copyright BBC).

[3] The "Justice 4 the 21 group" set up by victims' relatives continues its campaign (as at July 2018) for inquests into each death and a memorial near the site of the bombings. The bomb makers, planters and associates have been excluded from taking part in any inquest.

2. Oh Man!

Endless is the blowing desert
And in the shipwreck some may be lost
Too hot the sand too deep the oceans
It's just surviving whatever the cost

Desert Song by The Michael Schenker Group

At the start of 1975 inflation remained high, strikes continued to cripple manufacturing and public services, and unemployment was on the rise, passing the one million mark. It was at this time that I was summoned to Tarmac's head office in Wolverhampton, to be interviewed by a director named Neville Simms, who was a rising star, becoming, in due course, chief executive and being knighted in 1998. He offered me a position on the Seal Sands project which I then turned down, asserting that I really wanted to work overseas. Mr Simms was sympathetic, telling me that there were no major UK projects other than the less-than-inviting Seal Sands.

Every week, I studied the Construction News, colloquially known as "The Jackers Journal", to see what other positions might be available, but without much hope. Then, in early February, George the construction superintendent called me to say that the overseas office had telephoned and wanted to speak to me. I was summoned back to New Cavendish Street, without being given any details in advance. My interviewer made the position clear from the start, saying that I was lucky to be given a second chance. A project had just been awarded in Oman and it involved building 19 mini power stations in remote locations. They needed an engineer to go out and undertake unspecified duties: "The conditions may be somewhat arduous and challenging!". Was I interested? It was one of the easiest decisions I have ever had to make.

It took about six weeks to get visas, inoculations and medical checks sorted. The big news event that February was the crash at Moorgate station about five kilometres from Tarmac's offices, when

an underground train failed to stop and hit the end of the tunnel, resulting in many casualties. In fact, the loss of life was greater than had been caused by the Birmingham pub bombings which I had so narrowly avoided.

The history of Oman is almost as fascinating as the voyages of Sinbad the Sailor, who was said to have been born in Sohar, on the Gulf of Oman. At the start of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese were opening up their trade route to India and needed a base, entering the Gulf of Oman in 1507, sacking the town of Muscat and establishing control of the neighbouring region. This control lasted until the mid-17th century when the Omanis, under imam Sultan bin Saif, recaptured Muscat and later Zanzibar, from the Portuguese.

Zanzibar, which was the main slave market of the east African coast, became an increasingly important part of the Omani empire. Slaves were brought from Zanzibar to Oman although, when the British started to expand into that region, they tried to curtail this. On the then Sultan's death, his two sons both wanted to take control of the Omani empire and the British intervened, agreeing a compromise that Zanzibar should go to one son and Muscat and Oman to the other.

Oman also occupied the port city of Gwadar in Baluchistan, 700 km to the west of Karachi and its surrounding region from 1783, resulting in many Baluchis coming to Oman.[4] From 1798 the Sultans had the support of the British, who in that year made Oman a protectorate, a situation which has continued in spirit, if not formalised, to the present day. Oman, which is about the size of the British Isles (including Ireland), is not like a conventional state in that the power base lies with the tribal leaders in the interior of the country. The British negotiated a treaty in 1920 giving autonomy to the Nizwa region, Nizwa being the largest town and a former capital of the interior. However, in the early 1950's unrest broke out and one of the ruling imams, who was a powerful tribal leader, enlisted the help of Saudi Arabia in setting up an independent state. There were a number of uprisings in that region in the north of the country, and the Sultan

[4] Oman relinquished their territory in Baluchistan, selling it to Pakistan in 1958.

called on the British forces to contain these. The British needed no encouragement, wishing to obtain a concession in the potentially lucrative Fahud oil field which lay in the disputed territory claimed by Saudi Arabia and the Imams. Both the SAS and the RAF were critical to the success of these counter-insurgency operations. Avro Shackleton bombers and De Havilland Venom fighters went into action in 1956, and the destruction caused was to become visible on my travels. The uprisings persisted and just between July and December 1958, the RAF flew 1,635 sorties, dropping 1,094 tons of bombs and firing 900 rockets at the insurgents, their mountain-top villages and irrigation works. As a comparison, the British city of Coventry which was attacked by German bombers on the 14th and 15th November 1940 had a total of 504 tons of explosives and oil bombs dropped. But there were other world events, such as the Suez crisis and those in the Lebanon and Jordan at that time, which distracted the British media and politicians from the unreported and un-noticed events in Oman.

After the rebellions of the 1950s, the Sultan of Oman's armed forces were reorganised, with British advisors, training, equipment and funds. More Omanis were recruited into the ranks, but all the officers were British. Some were "seconded officers" while others were so-called contract officers, or mercenaries – men who had previously served in Oman with the British Army and who had chosen to return to earn handsome rewards. The seconded officers included the SAS trained Sir Ranulph Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes, who spent over three years in the southern province of Dhofar before becoming a professional explorer.[5] In 1966, a new rebellion broke out among the people of Dhofar province, the rebels being Arab nationalists. To the west of Dhofar lies Aden, from which the British were forced to withdraw at the end of 1967, in the face of increasingly violent rebellions. These rebellions resulted in British rule in Aden being replaced by a Marxist state, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which received aid from both China and Russia. By early 1968,

[5] Described in the Guinness Book of Records as "the world's greatest living explorer".

a Dhofari nationalist insurgency was developing into a Chinese-backed revolutionary movement with pan-Arabian ambitions.[6]

Oil was discovered in Oman at around this time and the new oil fields in the desert between Dhofar and the capital, Muscat, were beginning to look vulnerable. But the British were protecting a Sultan who wanted to remain in the Middle Ages and rarely left his palace in Salalah in Dhofar province. The Sultan owned around 500 slaves, an estimated 150 of them being women, who he kept at his palace. His son, Qaboos had been sent to Sandhurst Military Academy, after which he served one year as an officer in the British Army in Germany. Upon his return to Oman in 1966, Qaboos was placed under virtual house arrest in the Sultan's palace in Salalah by his father, being kept isolated from government affairs but allowed to retain a few handpicked expatriate friends. Qaboos made known his desire for change and with the support of his expatriate friends and the British Foreign Office, engineered a bloodless coup in 1970, sending his father into exile to the Dorchester Hotel, London. Qaboos then changed the name of the country from “Muscat and Oman” to “The Sultanate of Oman” as the outward looking Muscat area and inward-looking Oman had up to then operated like two separate countries.

The new Sultan’s immediate concern was the ongoing civil war in the south of the country; in addition to the involvement of Omani troops, which largely comprised Baluchis, he had the support of British, Jordanian and Iranian troops. The British-led forces had poisoned wells, torched villages, destroyed crops and shot livestock. During the interrogation of rebels, they developed their torture techniques, experimenting with noise. Areas populated by civilians were turned into free-fire zones. Little wonder that Britain wanted to fight this war in total secrecy and no journalists were permitted into the country, and nobody in the Wilson and subsequent Heath Governments mentioned the war. Whilst the British Government had every reason to be sensitive about the military support it was

[6] The author acknowledges the article written by the Guardian reporter Ian Cobain for some of this information.

providing, there were additional reasons for the all-embracing secrecy. This was an era in which the developing world and the United Nations had rejected colonialism, and Arab nationalism had been growing in strength for some time. It was vital, therefore, for the credibility of the UK with Arab nations, that its operations in Oman should remain largely hidden. Strategically, the Dhofar war was one of the most important conflicts of the 20th century, apart from the two World Wars, as the victors could expect to control the Strait of Hormuz through which all shipping to the Arabian Gulf passed, and hence the flow of oil. It has been called "Britain's forgotten war" which is somewhat misleading, as few people ever knew about it in the first place.

In 1970 at the time of the coup, Oman had very limited infrastructure. This amounted to three primary schools with 900 pupils (no secondary schools), one run-down general hospital, a small maternity hospital (eight out of every ten babies died within a year) and a few clinics, no paved roads, no electricity supply, no sanitation or water infrastructure, no national telephone system and only one medieval prison. The Sultan had banned any object that he considered decadent, which meant that Omanis were prevented from possessing radios, from riding bicycles, from playing football, from wearing sunglasses, shoes or trousers, and from using electric pumps in their wells. Qaboos had oil revenues at his disposal, but they were modest compared to those of the neighbouring Emirates and he had to pay for the ongoing war as well as developing the country.

* *

I was finally ready to leave and boarded a Gulf Air flight to Seeb Airport in Oman, finding myself sitting next to a buxom and outgoing young lady called Mary Jo, who told me that she worked at the British Embassy in Muscat and was having a great time there. I was to find out that there were very few unattached expatriate young ladies in Oman at that time and she had the pick of the bachelors. On arrival at Seeb Airport, the Tarmac transport manager, Ranawara, was waiting to drive me the 30 km to Ruwi, where Tarmac had their main compound.

However, after only five minutes' drive, we came across a fatal accident – an Omani man had been knocked down and killed by an expatriate couple, who had stopped and asked a driver going towards the airport to contact the ambulance and police (there was no public telephone system). I later learned that when the police eventually arrived, the first thing they did was to pull out their pistols and point them at the heads of the terrified expatriates.

To access the Tarmac camp, we had to drive along the concrete runway of the former airport at Ruwi, before reaching a compound of white ply-faced buildings situated at the back of the valley near a rocky outcrop. The whitewashed prefabricated offices were supplemented with a clubhouse (bar), several accommodation blocks, a workshop with electricity generators, the stores and an area at the back at the foot of the rocky hills for fabricating and storing material. Nearby were a few prefabricated houses which served as married quarters. The Tarmac operations in Oman were run by Paul, who liked to be a master of his own destiny and had as little to do with the UK office as he could manage. The main project for which the compound had been built, was the construction of a small naval base at Makullah, near Muscat. The rural power station buildings contract had only just been awarded, so as yet there were no staff assigned to this particular project.

The rural mini power stations were of a standard design by consultant engineers Khatib and Alami from Lebanon. Tarmac had been awarded the construction works whilst Hawker Siddeley Power Engineering, also from the UK, had been awarded the generation and transmission contract. My future boss, Mervyn, was either on leave or travelling when I arrived and other recruits, both Western expatriates and from third world countries, were yet to join the project. At this stage, there was no need for anyone else – we had to agree the precise location where each of the nineteen 2MW power stations would be situated!

When I arrived in April 1975, Qaboos had been ruler for under five years. There had been a large infrastructure programme which had attracted several overseas contractors, some of them working with local companies in a joint venture. The British companies included

the major names in contracting at that time - Tarmac, Costain, Wimpey and Taylor Woodrow. Other contractors such as Strabag and Dumez (from Austria and France respectively) had just been awarded the road building contracts to extend the coastal road which by now had reached the airport, northwards up the Batinah coast and after that into the part of the interior where the oil fields were located. The Greek Cypriot company, J & P, appeared to be the largest contractor in Oman and they had constructed the new Seeb Airport and much of the newly completed infrastructure.

The main towns of Muttrah, which included neighbouring Muscat, and seven other towns including Nizwa and Sohar, had by now installed gas turbine or diesel power stations, although these only served a fraction of the inhabitants in those areas. There was the need to quickly give the rural communities an electricity supply, but because of the distances and terrain involved, a grid was not practical, so two one-megawatt gas turbine generators were provided in each remote location. 2MW did not go very far but was a start and could be achieved quickly.[7] The local governors or Walis of these rural communities lobbied the Omani ministry, who selected nineteen districts for the electrification project. Over 99% of the land in Oman is desert and six of these power stations were located on the coastal fringe known as the Batinah coast which faces the Gulf of Oman. These communities, which typically had populations of about 15,000 inhabitants, relied for survival on fishing, crop farming using pumped well water, dates and herding goats.[8] Ten of the power stations were in the interior, some in very remote locations whilst the remaining three were in the detached Musandam peninsular, at the tip of the Gulf of Oman where it becomes the Strait of Hormuz. Some of the interior locations had very low populations, of perhaps no more than 3,000 inhabitants but the power stations were of a standard size regardless of the number of inhabitants which they served.

[7] The third recently constructed power station at Barka, one of the locations for these rural power stations has a capacity of 744MW. 2MW now seems like a drop in the ocean.

[8] The population of Oman has grown six-fold since 1973.

For the first few days after my arrival, I became acclimatised to the camp. At that time, there were few staff so Tarmac's local manager, Paul, would invite any rare new arrival to his house for an evening meal. It was the most uncomfortable meal of my life; Paul and his wife, nicknamed Griselda by the other expatriates, were plainly barely on speaking terms with each other. Barbed and sarcastic comments were exchanged across the dinner table as I longed for a quick escape. Tarmac's new manager for the power station project, Mervyn, thankfully arrived after a few days. He was a tall, shy, single, fair-haired young man in his early thirties who had come from a council estate in Coventry. He was, perhaps surprisingly, in many ways, an ideal person for the job – he was resourceful, a scrounger who disliked spending money and who was unfazed by the many challenges which most would have found daunting. He didn't like having to ask Paul permission for things and preferred to keep the power station project firmly in his own grasp. This gave Mervyn the nickname "Merv the swerve" because he could be evasive when asked for something that was not within his gift and required reference up the chain of command. On such occasions, Mervyn would just hope that the problem would go away, and sometimes it did. Mervyn also didn't mind roughing it when necessary, which meant things had to be quite bad before one complained about conditions.

There were five steps to building the power stations and the first was to find out where the local majlis or council wanted the station to be sited. Step two was to properly establish the boundary and provide a drawing of where it was to be located whilst the third required some soil tests in the location of the generators to establish if any special design measures were necessary. Step four was the construction of the power station, an accommodation block and a perimeter wall and the final step, which was undertaken by Hawker Siddeley Power Engineering, was to install the fuel tanks, generators and distribution system. I was to be involved in the first four stages.

Our transport was a petrol series III Land Rover pickup which was very basic. There was no power steering or power assisted brakes, no radio (which would have been pointless anyway), no air

conditioning and no insulation between the engine and the passenger compartment. The dashboard was bare metal without any internal trim of note and suspension was via leaf springs which gave a bone-jarring ride under the conditions experienced on unpaved roads. The engine heated up the foot-well to the extent that the heat could be felt through the soles of my desert boots, raising the temperature of an already scorching cabin. Perhaps to make an impression, Mervyn decided that we should go to one of the most inaccessible power stations first, at the edge of the Wahiba Sands. This was at Bilad Bani Bu Hasan which had a neighbouring settlement called Bilud Banu Bu Ali. The Alis had earlier been granted a clinic by the Government which had provoked the Hasan tribe to attack and badly damage it out of envy. There was a fear that the power station could suffer from a reciprocal attack by the Ali tribe. There was no way of contacting the Wali or governor in advance, so we were to set off, not knowing how we would be received. To get to the site would take seven hours and Mervyn wanted to get back the same day, so we set off at 2am, travelling most of the way on rough tracks. We took an interpreter with us, Mervyn doing much of the driving which he seemed to enjoy with the interpreter navigating along tracks which were in places only passable with four-wheel drive.

It was as well that we arrived by 9am; already the blistering heat from the Wahiba Sands was making us uncomfortable.[9] On our trips, we travelled light, taking a Coleman water cooler each, some sandwiches and Land Rover spares, tyres and sand ladders in case of a breakdown. The tools which we needed for the first visit were four metal pins, a sledgehammer and a shovel. The procedure that day was one with which I was to become familiar. As we approached the settlement which would often be surrounded by a high mud brick defensive wall, we would suddenly find ourselves miraculously within an oasis of palm and fruit trees, vegetables and fodder crops. Birds

[9] Now known as the Sharqiya Sands, little was known about this remote area of desert prior to an expedition by the Royal Geographic Society in 1986, some 12 years after my visits.

could be seen and heard in the trees and small fish sometimes swam in the irrigation canals. In the centre of the oasis would be a tall square or round fort with high mud brick walls. We would wait outside and send in the interpreter or Arab engineer with a letter from the ministry. After perhaps ten or fifteen minutes, we would be beckoned inside, passing the massive, ornately carved wooden portal, with a small cut-out door allowing entrance to only one stooping visitor at a time. Inside was dark but cool, the ceilings of forts being beamed with trunks of palm or candlewood supporting simple but elegant patterns of crisscrossed palm ribs and palm-frond mats. Around the perimeter sat young men, their rifles laid on the ground in front of them. In the centre on a matted area the Wali with the tribal elders held court.

An early action, following some introductions, was to show us hospitality and that meant coffee or Qahwa, following strict rules which must be observed. Omani coffee, which is served in a pot made from copper and brass with a beak shaped spout, is thick in consistency and served black, without sugar, but with spices such as cardamom, rose water and saffron. The coffee is served in order of importance of the visitors; I was normally served last. The coffee, which is obligatory, any refusal being an insult to the host, is poured in front of the visitor into a small white cup. The little cup is refilled once emptied after about five minutes and this continues until the visitor indicates that they have had sufficient by waggling the cup, it being polite to accept three cups. On one occasion, my waggling was not sufficiently visible, thus receiving five cups. My hosts remarked that I must really like the coffee!

Figure 2 Omani coffee pot (Bait al Zubair museum)

The discussion (in Arabic of course) would debate the location for the power station. It would ideally be close by, but outside the oasis, on land which was not owned by anyone or at the very least was not used for crops. Having agreed on the location, there would now be a site inspection. The Wali would go with some of the elders in his car or pickup and one of the elders would go in our Land Rover to ensure we didn't get lost. This meant that there was no space on the front seat for me and I had to get into the back, together with the young men and their rifles. As they clambered aboard, their rifles would be pointing in all directions and as I had no idea whether they had a bullet up the spout or in the magazine, I would duck and dive whenever a rifle ended up being pointed in my direction. As we set off, I would be desperately trying to note any features so that I could find my way unaided to the spot on a future trip. On arrival at a "suitable" location, arms would be waved, after which it was my job to pace out the approximate dimensions and insert four metal pins at the corners. Sometimes we would have to make adjustments, starting again if we encroached on owned land or a well. We would then take the hosts back to the fort and drive the long distance back to camp.

Figure 3 Omani coffee cup (photo unattributed blog)

The second visit would be to establish more exactly the four corners of the site and to produce a rudimentary map. I had to measure or pace dimensions to the nearest features and mark these on a plan. Sometimes it was relatively easy if there was a nearby junction where tracks met or a well or falaj (irrigation channel). On other occasions, there was just nothing in the vicinity except scrub or sand dunes and I had great difficulty in finding enough features to define the location. Just finding the pins I had inserted on the initial

visit was often regarded as an achievement. I could not be sure that they were still in position – someone might have removed them if they thought they were on their land. On one site, Al Mudairib, I spent over five hours travelling to the site which was in a nondescript area of scrub. The metal pins were elusive and after half an hour of futile searching I seriously thought I might have to abandon my visit. I finally found one pin, but even then, finding the other three proved to be remarkably difficult. I camped that night in a tent and was woken in the morning by some very load belching and groaning noises. Four or five camels were grazing nearby, demonstrating their rather poor digestive process. Fortunately, the camels did not approach me as they can be unpredictable; I generally gave wide berth to these creatures which can spit and have appalling breath.

Figure 4 Wali's house, Al Mudaibi

Figure 5 Setting out the power station at Al Mudairib after finally locating the pins

On returning to the site at Barka, on the Batinah coast, my interpreter, Saad, was approached by a local man who claimed that we had located the power station on his land. This land, which was in some scrub-covered sand dunes, had been allocated to us by the Wali for the power station as it did not have an owner. Saad asked the man to identify what land he owned, and he advised that it was “more or less” the exact plot which had been reserved for the power station.

Saad and I chuckled, knowing exactly what the game was, Saad then going to see the Wali to sort out the ownership. The Wali advised that he had previously been mistaken and that this man did indeed own the plot of land in question and would require compensation. This was how the tribes looked after those less fortunate among them, so we shrugged our shoulders and took a letter back to the ministry for compensation. I found Saad, an Omani, to be an amazing person, who was well educated and enlightened, with whom I enjoyed conversing. Wearing the local clothes of a dishdash (khandoura) and sandals, he lived in a house made from reeds (barusti) and slept on a mat on the ground. I asked him how he came to know English and he had, he told me, been working a few years previously as a lift engineer in Germany and therefore also spoke German. I was saddened to learn of Saad's death in a road accident a few months later.

But these were minor challenges compared to that which I faced on my return to Al Kamil near Bilad Bani Bu Hasan. Because of the distance, I took a tent, but set off rather later than the 2am start I had made previously. I was on my own and after about six hours driving was hot, dusty and tired. The last hour or so, I had been driving around the edge of the Wahiba Sands and it was like being in a furnace. The locals avoided travelling after about 9am in the morning because of the heat and there was no passing traffic. I knew that if I broke down, I would only last a few hours in the heat, there being no bush large enough to provide shade. When I finally reached Al Kamil, overheated, dusty and shaken by the long and rough ride, I then did something completely out of character. These oases existed because of the ancient falaj irrigation system, which collected the rainfall run-off from distant mountains into tunnels under the desert, surfacing where the gradient of the channel and ground met. The aflaj had been constructed before there were any historical records, possibly 2,000 years previously, by the Persians, providing clear cool running water which often contained small fish. [10] The sight of the one at Al Kamil was too much for me to resist in my condition. I shooed away the veiled

[10] Aflaj is the plural of falaj, irrigation and water supply channels.

women who were collecting the water in pots by clapping my hands, then stripped off naked and sat in the falaj for five minutes, enjoying a well-deserved refreshing bath, the fish nibbling at my toes.

Figure 6 Approaching Al Kamil

Figure 7 Children at Al Kamil – I was worthy of a salute!

I arrived at the plot of land, which was located among sand dunes, pitching my tent nearby but just out of sight of the power station site. I worked to accurately establish the four corners of the site using a theodolite instrument and was just knocking in the last metal pin with the sledgehammer when an Omani man approached me in an extremely agitated manner. Although I could not understand him, I released after a while what the problem was. Just inside the boundary was a well, his well, and by using this land I was going to deprive him of his livelihood. I had to make a quick decision and judging the agitated state of this man who wore a khunjar, the curved dagger which Omani tribesman wear, I knew what I had to do. I had suffered greatly to get this far but I was not prepared to die over the matter; in fact, the sloping dune-covered site was hardly ideal for a power station. I removed the last pin and threw it to the ground, demonstrating to the tribesman that he had won the dispute. I then quickly removed myself and theodolite from the site, climbing the adjacent dune to find my tent. As I reached the crest of the dune, I thought that I must be seeing things as I rubbed my eyes in amazement, my single tent having somehow turned into three tents.

The other two tents belonged to four or five British and Greek expatriates from an engineering consulting company.[11] "What are you doing here?" I demanded. It is perhaps unsurprising how off-hand a person can be when they are feeling a little peeved. "We are setting out a road" came the reply. "Well", I said, surveying the unending sand dunes and wilderness around me, "you will have to move the road". "We cannot do that, it has to go here" came the rejoinder. There was a pregnant pause. I thought about the Omani tribesman and his well. "OK then" I said, "You can put the road here and I will ask to move the power station". What were the chances of two expatriate teams spending just one night in a solitary location in the middle of the desert meeting up?

I drove back towards Ruwi early the next morning but on the way, shortly after I had met the fork in the track leading to the oil fields, I was flagged down. The driver of the vehicle asked me for some water for his radiator and then explained that he had just come across a fatal accident, the victim lying by the side of the road. He had dug a shallow grave to protect the body from the vultures which had already started to gather. I then realised that there was another use for the shovel I carried besides the obvious one of digging out a bogged-down Land Rover from the sand dunes.

One site I had to visit was at Al Mudaibi which required travelling over tracks which almost disappeared at times, some in the rocky Oman mountains and some in the shifting sands of the desert beyond. There were no civilian road maps of Oman although I suppose the Armed Forces must have used maps produced by aerial surveys. The only map I came across was one produced by the petroleum company PDO in the back pocket of book by the Department of Information about Oman and published in 1972 (fig 18). I therefore needed a local person to navigate and after asking around, someone was eventually found who knew the area and could perform this service. On the return journey from setting out the site at Al Mudaibi,

[11] The company was the British consulting civil engineering firm of Sir Alexander Gibb and Partners which had an office in Athens.

the navigator asked if he could visit his village, which I agreed to as it seemed a reasonable request. He then drove on barely defined tracks for about half an hour before we arrived at a tiny settlement whose existence depended on a single well. He parked the Land Rover near the well and went to his house to meet his family, leaving me sitting in the vehicle for about twenty minutes. I watched veiled women passing on their way to and from the well. I am almost sure that they had never seen a white person before, in fact they had probably never left the village. Curiosity overcame several girls and young women who drew their veils to one side so that they could get a better look at me. I must have been the talk of the village the rest of the day!

The third stage of each visit required the taking of soil readings under the location of the generator bases for each site, the readings being recorded using a Standard Penetration Test (SPT). The heavy hammer which consisted of a 64kg doughnut shaped sliding cylinder on a shaft with pointed and split end attachments had arrived from the UK and a block and tackle was obtained locally.[12] The hammer had to be mounted on a tripod which needed to be about four metres in height, too

Figure 8 SPT rig

[12] For reference, the usual maximum weight for a suitcase when travelling economy class by air is 23kg. The SPT hammer was transported in a wooden box with rope handles and took 4 labourers to load and unload it from the back of the Land Rover.

long to be transported on our Land Rovers. Mervyn asked me to collaborate with the workshop to build a tripod from galvanised pipe and this was split into three sections with a tripod head with a hook at the top. Each section of galvanised pipe was drilled to take a connecting lug which had been welded to the section above, the sections then being painted and numbered. With poor manufacturing tolerances, the sections had to be connected together in exactly the right location, often requiring some trial and error. I had a crew of four Omani labourers and an Indian or Pakistani supervisor to undertake the soil tests, recording the number of blows to achieve a defined penetration of the pointed conical rod into the ground at certain depths. In poor ground, it was also necessary to take soil samples using a split tube sampler, but it was normally possible to complete all the tests in a period of four or five hours.

Figure 9 View from the road to Ibra, a wadi in the foreground

By now, we had radios but to use these we needed a three-metre-long glass-fibre aerial which was transported in a tube on a frame at the rear of the Land Rover. The value of the radio was limited for several reasons. It could only be used when stationary, after the

aerial had been removed from its tube and screwed onto a housing attached to the pick-up body. Secondly, the quality of transmission was very variable, it being frequently impossible to get through to base unless atmospheric conditions were favourable. The third issue was the fact that we could not afford to have someone sitting listening out for infrequent barely audible radio transmissions on a full-time basis. An Indian clerk, Saleem, was delegated to listen out for a two-hour period every afternoon when there might be a possibility of a transmission. He was sometimes called away on other duties, so it was very hit and miss, more miss than hit, to get through. Even if it was possible to get through, it could take an hour or more after that before a rescue vehicle could be dispatched from Ruwi in the event of a breakdown or accident and several hours after that for it to arrive.

Figure 10 The author sitting on a fishing boat on the Batinah coast near one of the sites

The ride of the Land Rover improved markedly at higher speeds as the suspension could not react to each rut and the vehicle skimmed over the tops of the corrugations which stabilised the ride. It was therefore necessary to pass the truck at the earliest opportunity, but the Land

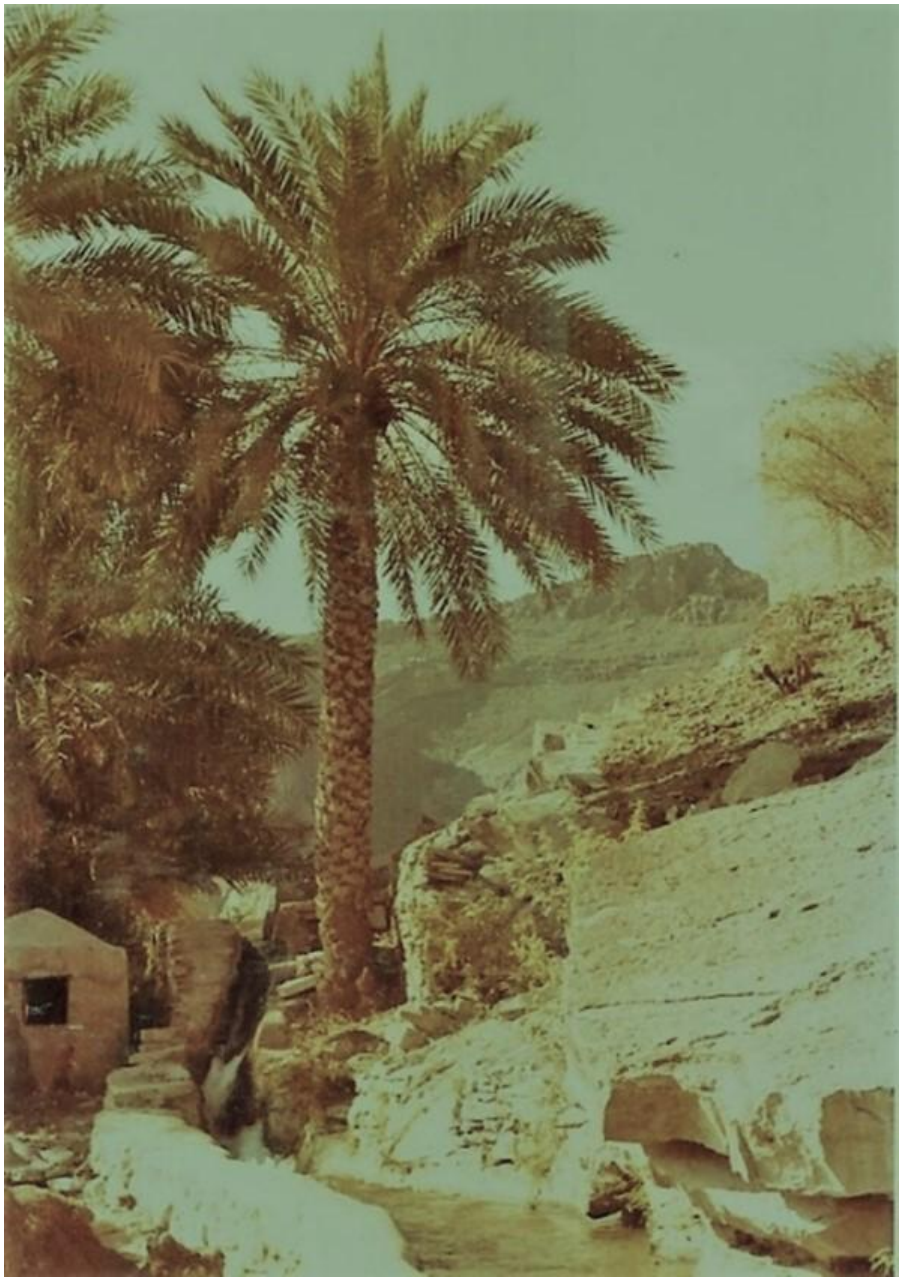

Figure 11 (right) Falaj emerging from rocks

Rover had poor acceleration, particularly on the bumpy tracks. Passing these long trailers therefore took some time and could only be achieved when the prevailing wind blew the dust away from the

following driver's vision. Frequently, an overtaking manoeuvre would have to be aborted when there was a bend in the road, thus directing dust in the wrong direction. It was with great relief to all on board when the overtaking was safely completed. Little used tracks leading to and from small settlements would cross the main road with the result that vehicles using these tracks would sometimes shoot straight across the main highway, as there were no warning road signs and it was easy for a driver to believe that there were no other vehicles to worry about. From time to time, it would be necessary to run along the bed of a wadi or to cross a wadi (a dried-up river channel which comes into life when it rains in the mountains), these wadis frequently containing boulders which needed to be avoided. There were also unmarked water channels which crossed the track and on one occasion, Mervyn failed to notice one of these and we almost shot one of the workers in the back of the Land Rover clean out of the vehicle – the metal frame which had been welded to the pick-up saved him.

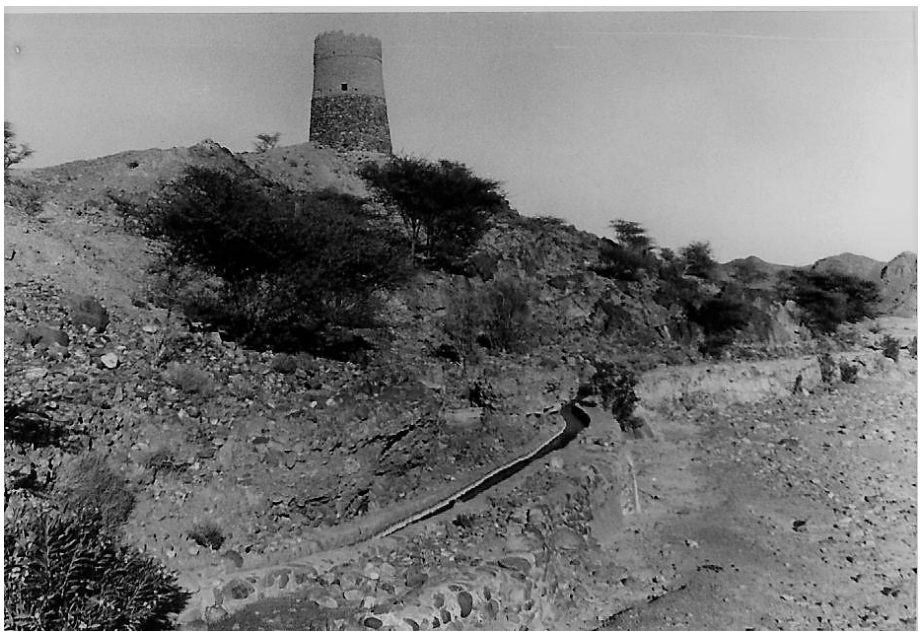

Figure 12 Falaj near Nizwa with Portuguese fort

Fortunately, I managed to return after visiting the sites without too many mishaps – punctures were commonplace and George in the workshop had thoughtfully given me a comprehensive set of spares.

This was just as well and once I had needed to replace all four sparkplug ignition cables as they failed one by one in the heat. There were two notable occasions when things did not go to plan, the first being a trip to Al Mudaibi to undertake soil tests. The journey had a mixture of terrain – rough, rocky roads ascending to an altitude of perhaps six or seven hundred metres followed by barely visible sandy tracks with the occasional crossing of a sandy bed of a dormant stream. I debated with George which tyres to put on the Land Rover and we settled for standard tyres, fearing that sand tyres, which were wider and less prone to getting bogged down, would be readily punctured on the rough, rocky sections of track. I asked for three spare tyres but was told that I could only have two. I set out fully laden early one morning with Iqbal the foreman beside me and four Pakistani labourers in the back. In addition, we carried the heavy SPT equipment, sand tracks, a shovel, provisions and three tents; we were right down on the vehicle springs. I started to feel a bit queasy as the journey progressed, but I hoped that the feeling would pass.

The first puncture occurred after about one and a half hours. With only one other spare, I looked for a settlement where I could have it fixed. I spotted a couple of Zanzibaris at the side of the track and they directed me to the local workshop which consisted of a 45-gallon drum of petrol, a hand pump and a small workshop under a galvanised metal sheet. The puncture was duly fixed but as there was no electricity, the tyre was inflated by unscrewing one of the sparks plugs and attaching a hose to the engine block, using the engine compression to provide the pressure. A little further on, this procedure was repeated when we had another puncture. By now, because of the delays, it was midday when we reached the site, and after pitching my tent, I collapsed inside, feeling decidedly unwell. Fortunately, Iqbal and his crew had previously undertaken a soil test enabling me to leave them to it.

I was unable to eat or take even a small sip of water and had a restless night. The following morning my condition had not improved; I could barely stand up. After trying the radio without any luck, I asked Iqbal if he or anyone of the labourers could drive. It transpired that I

was the only person who knew how to drive, so with only enough water and provisions for the one night, we had to set off. I made Iqbal soak my face flannel and hold it out of the vehicle window, the evaporation cooling the cloth which I applied to my face every few minutes to keep me awake and conscious. Inevitably, we had three punctures, and it took us some time to get them fixed, delaying our progress considerably. We now came to the section of track which had been hewn out of mountains and was so rough that we bounced from one stone to the next. The track twisted and turned requiring constant braking, but applying the brakes was all but impossible. Without power assisted brakes, I could barely exert enough pressure to brake under normal circumstances let alone in my debilitated condition. The only way I could manage to control the speed was by using the engine to slow the vehicle as we bounced along the winding and rapidly descending track. Each gear change had to be perfect, or we were doomed, and I had to apply superhuman concentration to ensure I made every one of them.

It was by now getting dark, but we had passed the most difficult sections of track and were winding along a section which had been carved along the side of the mountain, about five metres above the dried-up wadi bed below. The headlights barely picked out the road and then, suddenly, all was dark. I stopped as quickly as I could, wondering if we were going over the edge into the dry rocky wadi bed or crashing into the side of the mountain. The constant shaking had damaged the light switch but after fiddling with the switch, we managed to restore the headlights, continuing a little further until the same thing happened again. Fearing further episodes of headlamp failure, I had to slow down to continue the journey, finally reaching Fanjah, where we crossed the wide wadi and came across another Tarmac Land Rover. Mervyn, alarmed that I had not returned, had sent a driver to look for me but my ordeal was not yet over as I still had to drive back to Ruwi in my poor condition and was out of action for the next two days. Despite drinking several bottles of water once my stomach had settled, I had become so dehydrated that it was a further two days before I could pee. A few days later, I was with Iqbal when

someone asked him about our trip. He told them that we survived “By the grace of God” and I nodded in agreement.

The second notable, but less dramatic, trip was a similar expedition to Shinas at the northern end of the Batinah coast. This time I did not take a tent as by now sections of paved road had been completed and it only took about three and a half hours to drive there. After a seven o’clock start, I turned off the main road into the power station site and came to a halt. As I pressed the brake pedal, it suddenly lost all resistance, and I found my foot on the floor. I had no brakes, but by a miracle this had not happened on the road but right at the end of my journey. None of my crew had any mechanical aptitude so I decided to investigate, having some basic knowledge as I had previously changed the brake shoes of my Mini in Southampton. I eventually found the cause; a piston rod had snapped. I extracted the broken rod and set out on a walk of about a mile to the village of Shinas on the other side of the main road. No one appeared to have any spares for this part, or any rod of the right size and I made several enquiries before one of the garage owners said, “I might be able to make a rod for you, but it won’t be exactly the same as your sample”. I had no choice but to accept this offer, returning with the new rod which I fitted, noting that it was slightly larger in diameter and although I could now apply the brakes, they would not fully release.

By now, I had decided to abandon any idea of conducting the soil tests that day and was just concentrating on getting back to Ruwi before nightfall. We set off gingerly and although I tried to avoid braking, the brakes were still partially binding, heating up the brake drum. I looked out for wells along the route and each time we came to one, I would stop, gather a scoop of water and cool the brake drum. We finally made it to Ruwi, but a further surprise was in store; about twenty metres before the compound gates, the engine coughed and expired. I was finally able to get the four labourers to do some work as they pushed the Land Rover across the “finishing line”. George was watching from his office overlooking the compound and remarked to me “Pincher” (his favourite term for any of us young engineers), “You

always bring them back". This was as near to praise as was possible from George.

I was not travelling all the time and was sometimes to be found in the yard at the back of the compound, searching for materials, getting formwork made and arranging for material to be shipped to site. November arrived; it was approaching the anniversary of the National Day and the Sultan's Birthday, and Tarmac, along with other contractors, was expected to erect an arch to mark the occasion. Such arches would be positioned at strategic locations in the Muscat area, needing to be complete before the day. In the past, several of these arches had blown over, which was considered a bit of an insult, and the perpetrators were fined, or worse, put in the cells for a few days. Paul had delegated the construction and erection of the arch this year to Mervyn who had in turn delegated it to me. I was told where our arch needed to be located – on a road leading to one of the Sultan's palaces which he used while the enormous new palace was being constructed along the foreshore in Muscat. I was given no specific instructions other than that I had to design, fabricate, and erect the arch, ensuring that it remained intact and upright for the big day and for at least a week afterwards. I measured the road and decided to play safe, so I allowed a little extra height and a little extra width. I kept the design simple, in accordance with Islamic tradition, but ensuring it did not blow over was a challenge. The ground conditions were silty sand, but I had no design data, and in any case, I was not a design engineer. I reasoned that I should design the foundations as if they were freestanding and calculated a probable maximum wind load. The foundations had to be dug by hand and concreted using materials brought to site and when I saw just how much hand excavation and concrete was required to achieve my safe design, I felt a bit guilty. It seemed that all these precautions were over the top, until the night before the big day, when a storm unexpectedly suddenly blew up, creating strong gusts of wind. Sure enough, the following day, some of the arches had blown over. I asked the transport manager, Ranawara, to send a driver to check on our arch and was greatly relieved to hear that it was undamaged.

Figure 13 Tarmac National Day arch

The time came when construction started on the first of the sites at Al Khabura on the Batinah Coast. An expat foreman, Ron, arrived and was posted there, but the accommodation was not very good, amounting to little more than a plywood shack. I was tasked with designing and supervising the fabrication of site accommodation which would fit on the back of one of our Bedford trucks. I wanted to give Ron some decent living quarters but was mindful of Mervyn's penny pinching. After the steel angle-iron frame was built, it was time to form the walls. I had noticed sheets of white melamine faced panels in the yard and decided that would be an ideal material for the shower. Then, I thought that it would also look good in the kitchen and dining area. After that, I decided that I might as well continue with the bedroom. I was in luck; the local builders' merchant had sufficient stock of this expensive material, the end result looking very attractive. I wondered when I would be told off about the expense and was alarmed when Paul came unannounced to inspect the cabin. He made

no comment as he left, and I waited with bated breath. I had heard nothing and was about to ship the unit to the site about a week later where an expectant Ron was growing increasingly impatient.

Mervyn broke the news, and I had to tell Ron that he would have to wait a few more weeks. Paul, as ever looking for opportunities to make money, had used my unit as a “show house” and had made a sale of eight of the accommodation units to the Royal Oman Police, the yard going into overdrive making these before the ninth was eventually shipped to Ron. At least Mervyn was not in a position to say anything about the expense!

Figure 14 Tarmac compound at Ruwi

As work progressed on site, I spent more time in the yard sharing radio operator duties with Saleem. That meant that I could get out of the fierce sun in the afternoon, but I needed to find another shady place in the late mornings and this place would be the stores. Following Mervyn’s edict, I scavenged for material which had not been used on other contracts and could be of use to us in the construction of power stations. I therefore spent some time in the stores which consisted of a relatively small building where valuable items such as tools were kept. Out at the back were a bank of tarpaulin-covered

racks constructed out of angle iron, the tarpaulins keeping the worst of the dust off, the area being dimly lit with the occasional naked lightbulb. One day I was looking for bolts in one of the darkest recesses when my foot felt a box-like object on the floor. I inspected the object more closely and noticed that it was a coffin. Both alarmed and intrigued, I asked the expat storekeeper if there had ever been any demand for it and he told me “No, as yet no one has asked for it!”.

A few months later, an Asian workman was found dead in the desert, not far from the road to the oil wells. It was a complete mystery as to how he had ended up there, but it was confirmed that Tarmac employed him. His mates took the coffin to bury him, but unfortunately, his body had swollen in the heat and one leg would not completely fit inside. His shrouded body was taken to the graveyard in the coffin, minus the lid, and the corpse dumped into the excavation they had dug. The coffin was then returned to the stores, ready for the next occupant.

We initially only had Bedford trucks of the type in service with the British Army to service the sites, but the rough roads took their toll and the trucks were always in the workshop with prop shafts and differentials often exposed to view. We finally received four Mercedes flat-bed lorries with a hydraulic lifting device called a Hiab. These were a godsend and were amazingly robust and reliable. I would load up these trucks with everything from formwork, concrete mixers and third world workers. It might seem callous to send men on a three or four hour-long bumpy ride on the back of a flatbed lorry, but it was quite normal at that time for all contractors to do this.

On one occasion, there was a festivity, possibly the Hindu Deepavali celebrations. I had loaded up a Mercedes truck with a concrete mixer which meant that the headroom required was quite high. The route to the main road passed through the township of Ruwi where third world workers and support staff lived. Power was available to certain points, and this had been extended by means of overhead wires to serve houses, shops and electric signs and festival lights. It was late afternoon, and I was keen for the driver to leave so that the equipment would arrive on site that evening. The driver had

cold feet, stating that the high load might catch the overhead wires and he would go to “Jelali”. The term “Jelali” in Oman meant jail, for the simple reason that at that time there was only one jail in Oman and that was Fort al-Jelali.

The harbour for Muscat is protected by two Portuguese forts, Fort al-Jalali and Fort al-Mirani, originally built in the 1580’s and captured by the Persians in the early eighteenth century before being retaken by the Omani forces in 1781. Fort al-Jelali is only accessible via some stone steps leading from a rocky outcrop and became Oman’s only prison, until a new prison was opened during my stay in Oman. As far as I knew, no Westerner had been held there (they were usually put in a cage with other prisoners at a police station) but just the mention of the name “Jelali” struck terror. Conditions inside have been described by a Colonel David Smiley, a former commander of the Sultan's armed forces at Muscat as "a veritable hellhole". It was rumoured (probably accurately) that between a hundred and two hundred men were kept in a pit deep within the fort with little or no light and no circulating air and that food was lowered to them once a day on a rope. Few prisoners ever re-emerged alive and if they did they died soon afterwards or were insane.

I heard the alarming story of one Westerner, a Swede, who had visited the bar at another contractors’ camp and had returned in a drunken state to Ruwi on the unlit runway which served as a road. He had knocked down and killed an Omani and the family had refused “blood money” to pay for the crime and he therefore served an indeterminate sentence in the police cells. After about fifteen months there, he was virtually mad; it was not a good idea to be arrested and incarcerated. Bringing down cables could cause damage to houses and shops, electrocution to passers-by and cut off electricity supplies to the area. The police had a standard way of dealing with such occurrences which was to arrest the person responsible and hold them in the cells until such time as reparations had been made and any fine had been paid. I needed to persuade the truck driver, offering him an escort for the start of his journey. But he was still unwilling, saying that he was the one who would still be arrested, not the escort, who

themselves were somewhat reluctant to go. Finally, I realised that there was only one solution. If I went with the driver, the police would take me as the person responsible, absolving the driver and escort of blame. I made a T shaped cross-piece on a long plank of wood and stood in the back of the truck. It was now dusk, and the escorting Land Rover led the way, stopping when the driver could see overhead wires in the gloomy conditions. The truck then inched forward while I pushed the cable up, clear of the concrete mixer. This happened on about four or five occasions before we had passed through the settlement. I don't think the foreman at the site where I was sending the truck realised how lucky he was to get the desperately needed delivery that night!

Apart from visits to site, the only opportunity for me to escape from the Ruwi camp would be on a Sunday. If I stayed at the camp, I knew that the two Caterpillar generators would be serviced in the afternoon. The incessant background din of the generators would suddenly cease, all the air conditioning units, radios and cassette players would fall silent, the profound absolute silence causing the sound of any voice to be an intrusion. Sometimes, I would go to Muscat, not the metropolitan area but the tiny walled city which was dominated by the new Royal Palace which was under construction. Until a few years previously, the city had been sealed three hours after sunset, the gates being guarded and anyone without a lantern prevented from entering. The main attraction in Muscat was the souk with its unpaved but covered surface which meandered up and down hill. There, one could buy radio cassette players, cassette tapes, genuine watches (as well as copies) and all manner of things needed by Omanis including Maria Theresa silver dollars.

Having been cut off from the music scene, I would gaze at the pirate cassette tapes, looking at the covers and wondering what to try. In that way, I could experiment with all sorts of artists who I had never heard of or had changed direction with new material. I was never sure what to expect but I rarely bought a cassette that I did not get to like after playing it a few times: Cockney Rebel, 10cc, Blondie, John Lennon (as a solo artist), James Taylor and JJ Cale all came to my notice. In the

Tarmac bar, new arrivals would bring the latest tapes from the UK which included a new supergroup which had taken the music scene by storm, Abba.

I also undertook a little exploring of the immediate vicinity, on one occasion climbing the rocks at the back of old Muscat and coming face to face with an Arabian red fox – I am not sure which of us was more surprised. Another trip was to the little fishing village of al Bustan, which I undertook with Rod, a young engineer of about my age, who worked for a firm of British civil engineering consultants. An unpaved road had been cut through the mountains at a point near the Tarmac compound, ending at a small bay at al Bustan. It was a rare chance to go swimming, but I almost came unstuck on my third visit when the sea was rougher than usual. There was a strong rip current, and I battled against it to get back to shore, where I eventually emerged exhausted. After that, I never swam there again.

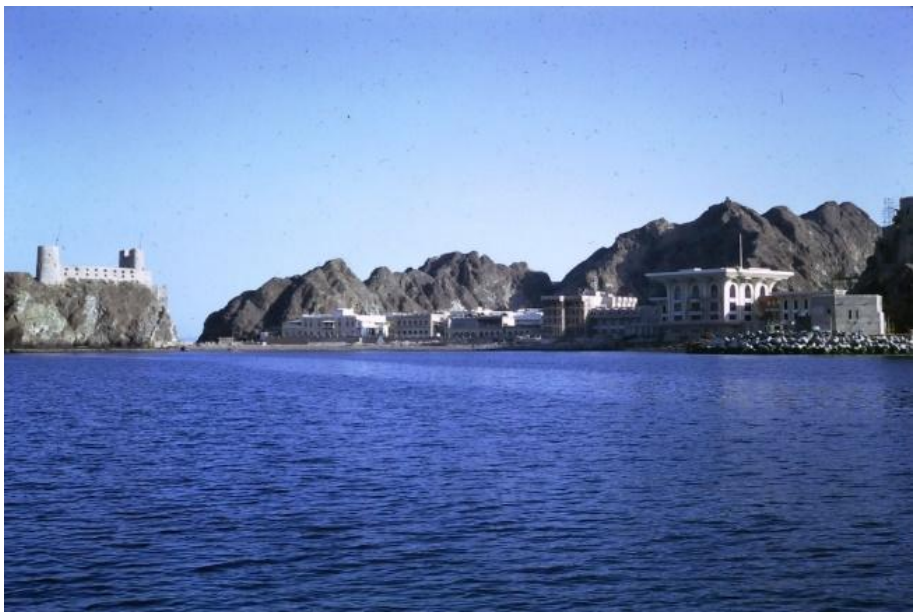

Figure 15 Muscat Bay, Ft Jelali on left, Sultan's palace on right occupying much of the waterfront in Muscat

The naval base project had a work boat and one Sunday a family day was arranged. This was an opportunity for men, wives and pre-school children to have an outing and the tugboat chugged along

the coast until we came to a nice, deserted bay surrounded on each side by rocks. As I entered the sea to swim from the boat to the shore, I was cautioned about the presence of a conger eel which was known to inhabit an underwater cave on one side of the bay. Conger eels which can grow up to almost three metres in length are predators and have attacked humans with their sharp backward raking teeth. I was told that an unfortunate expat had previously been attacked, suffering a bite to his ankle, causing him to bleed to death and that news rather dampened my enjoyment of the swim. On the way back, the boat's propeller fouled some fishing nets, and we spent over half an hour wallowing in the waves while efforts were made to untangle the netting, causing many of us to become quite queasy and very sun burned.

As Tarmac took on more work and the power station project ramped up, more expatriates arrived. Initially, there were just the staff for the naval base project and the support staff at Ruwi camp. The support staff included Phil, a public school educated quantity surveyor and estimator who very much enjoyed the expat life and took advantage of what it had to offer. He played rugby, organized events and helped newcomers, such as me, to settle in. Then there was George who ran the compound workshop and transport maintenance and who made sure that everyone knew that he was in charge whenever a decision had to be made. Under George were several expat fitters and mechanics. Len was an introvert who said little but was a super mechanic and my first choice whenever my Land Rover needed checking out. There was Stuart who was somewhat wild looking in his appearance of longish hair and staring eyes. If summoned to a breakdown, Stuart would scratch his head, frown and say words to the effect "I wonder what is wrong?". He had worked previously in Saudi Arabia where he had had an unfortunate experience. He had found himself in a crowd one day when he was roughly manhandled and pushed to the front where the jeering mob were witnessing a beheading. I was told that he was never quite the same after that. Despite his limited ability to fix mechanical problems, he was in fact indispensable, and no one ever complained about him.

He had the ability to tell an amusing story or make anyone laugh at the drop of a hat and if Stuart entered the bar after a tough day, the mood would instantly change as he quickly had everyone laughing and joking.

Those who worked overseas did so for several reasons. They might be seeking adventure or a release from the shackles of working in a Western environment with its strict rules and regulations. They were often promoted to positions which they would never have achieved back home, being given responsibilities beyond their training (and sometimes their expertise). Some were escaping actual or threatened breakups in their relationships and marriages, and some were escaping their demons. There were those that found themselves working overseas because they couldn't find work in the UK and those who wanted the money for a debt or mortgage repayment. Some had spent so long working overseas that it was the only life they knew whilst others were permanently homesick. We were a mixed bunch.

Ron, the first foreman to arrive for the power station project, was a veteran expat who didn't enjoy fraternizing with the other expats and wanted to be left alone to get on with the job on whichever site he was posted to. He got on well with Len, the fitter, who was also something of a loner. Next to arrive was Bert who had limited overseas experience and who found working with third world labour frustrating, often being unable to control these frustrations, shouting at and cursing the miscreants. Occasionally, he would become drunk in the bar in the evening and would suddenly burst into tears and run around the bar crying "I killed a man!". He must have been in the armed forces at the end of the second world war and had killed an enemy soldier (or civilian), the circumstances still haunting him. The rest of us had to reassure him and calm him down.

The third foreman to arrive was Mike who had never worked overseas before. He seemed rather bemused at the way third world workers reacted and behaved, and I wondered how he would get on when Mervyn sent him to the site at Adam which was one of the more remote locations. Mike told me that he had come out in order to pay off his mortgage and after a few weeks, I set off for Adam to see how

Mike was managing. I was relieved to find that he seemed to be settling in well and when I next met him, he was talking about spending another year in Oman, so he could put down a deposit on a yacht. He probably spent the rest of his working life overseas before taking early retirement!

Malcolm from Northern Ireland came next, and he couldn't wait to be posted to the site in Khasab. Malcolm was the sort of guy who would immediately make himself at home anywhere in the world, so he was the ideal candidate for this remote location. But following on from Malcolm was a rather sad case and I cannot even remember the name of this foreman for reasons which will become obvious. The day after his arrival, Mervyn asked me to ensure that he was safely dispatched with a driver to one of the sites. I didn't see him at breakfast so when the driver was ready, I knocked at his door. There was no response and opening the door slowly, I found a man sitting on the bed shaking uncontrollably. After about twenty minutes, I managed to get him into a Land Rover and drive him to the nearby expatriate clinic. He had to be given several injections to sedate him, and the nurse told me that it was the worst case of a nervous breakdown she had ever seen. The poor man had not wanted to leave his wife and young family, but circumstances had meant that he had accepted this posting. It was obvious that it would not be wise to send him to a remote location and he caught the first available flight back home. This left a shortage in site project managers which needed to be met which directly impacted me as I was to find out.

As more Omani projects, unrelated to the power station contracts, were awarded to Tarmac, staff to support these arrived in a steady stream. One foreman, named Peter, was allocated the minor works which no-one else was interested in because this included maintaining the accommodation used by Tarmac and consultant engineering company wives, a seemingly thankless and uninteresting task. Peter was an enigma and surprised us all when, on the day of arrival, he pronounced that he was gay. To put this into context, the sexual offenses bill was only passed in 1967 and this only applied to England and Wales, homosexuality still being illegal in all other parts

of the UK. Construction was (and still is) quite a "macho" male dominated conservative industry and the homophobic expatriate Rugby club in Oman had as rule number one "No pooftahs". This was a very bold declaration by Peter, which he would remind us of at regular intervals, coming to the bar after work with the phrase "What a gay day!". This approach certainly stopped any jokes or comments about gays unless instigated by Peter himself, but perhaps Peter had an ulterior motive. It was noticed after a few weeks that Peter spent an inordinate amount of time maintaining the married quarters; the accommodation must have been falling apart judging by the amount of attention needed. It was then that the awful truth was suspected – Peter was bisexual and was using homosexuality as his cover to hide his adulterous affairs.

Just as an engine needs oil to lubricate the parts and prevent them from seizing up, we needed someone to ensure that we complied with officialdom, obtained permits in good time and kept on good terms with our Omani clients. This task was performed by Zacharia, or Zach, a young handsome and proud Omani who often had a smile on his face. We didn't see much of Zach as he would leave in his Japanese car every morning to go to the ministries, police and other government departments and agencies, usually returning in the afternoon with the completed paperwork. Zach rarely came to the bar, so it was with some surprise that at about 3pm one afternoon, I heard that Zach had invited us all to have a drink at the bar to celebrate his new car. Zach had never mentioned anything about wanting a new car and this invitation came as a complete surprise to everyone.

As I walked over to the bar, I looked in Zach's parking place and there, sure enough, was a flash American limo with tinted windows. I, along with others, was puzzled as this looked out of keeping with his lifestyle. Once we had all assembled in the bar, Zach entered, grinning from ear to ear. Having paid for us all to have a drink, he then told us the story of the car. He had been driving in the Muttrah area that morning and had had an accident, his Japanese car suffering quite badly in the collision although the other car was virtually unscathed. Zach got out from his car and ruefully inspected the damage after

which the other driver came over, saw a rather dejected Zach and said to him (in Arabic of course) “I seem to have damaged your vehicle, you had better have mine!” and passed him a set of keys.

One of the surprises we had (it must have been an even bigger surprise to the Omanis) were the newsreaders who read the evening news on Omani TV. Without electricity and transmission towers, the TV station could only be received by people in the Muscat area and was initially mainly a way that the Sultan could show the people what he was doing to modernize the country, having female newsreaders to promote female emancipation. This was 1975, in a country emerging from a time-warp having been trapped in the Middle Ages and where women held no position of note in public office. What was the situation in the UK at that time? Angela Rippon was the first regular female newsreader on BBC, commencing in 1975, whilst Anna Ford, the equivalent on ITV, started in 1978.

* *

The war in the south of the country did not seem very real to us expats. There was only one track through the desert from the north to reach the Dhofar province in the south and it took a minimum of three days to make the journey. In practical terms, the southern capital, Salalah, could only be reached by air or sea. Many of the fighting forces were based in the south, but training was undertaken at the Bait al-Falaj camp not far from our compound in Ruwi whilst the Air Force had their own military airbase near Seeb Airport, sharing the runway with civilian operations. The expatriate military forces mainly stayed in their camps giving us little opportunity to meet them. Those who joined the Sultan’s Army or Air Force usually wanted to see some military engagement and were risk takers who did not like having to be accountable for their actions. They resented being called mercenaries as they had often been actively encouraged to join the Sultan’s Army or Air Force if they found the rules and discipline of the British armed forces too constricting or wanted to operate in a hostile environment. I was about to find this out for myself on my trips to the Musandam peninsular.

My first contact with the armed forces came through the inter-company darts tournament. Tarmac had several very accomplished darts players, so I did not normally make the team, but on this occasion, a couple of these were unavailable and I was selected. Our opponents were the intelligence services, a shady military organization that was housed in a block with few windows in the Ruwi valley, surrounded by a security barrier and coils of barbed wire. We took a minibus and managed to gain entry surprisingly easily – we had probably already been cleared by security. Inside, we were told that our opponents were short of players, and they asked if they could rope in whoever was available at any particular time during the match. We naturally agreed to this somewhat unusual request, their team consisting of both expats and Omanis, who walked around with walkie-talkies, talking in hushed tones and frequently suddenly disappearing without warning with the occasional new face appearing unannounced to take their place.

One of the Omani new faces said that he had never played darts before and asked if we could explain the rules. There was no time in the middle of a competition to explain the intricacies so to make things simple, he was simply told to throw the darts at the centre of the board. He picked up the first dart, curling his four fingers around the barrel and hurled the dart at the board. He scored a bull of course - these were not men to mess around with.

Figure 16 & 17 Oasis scenes with date palms

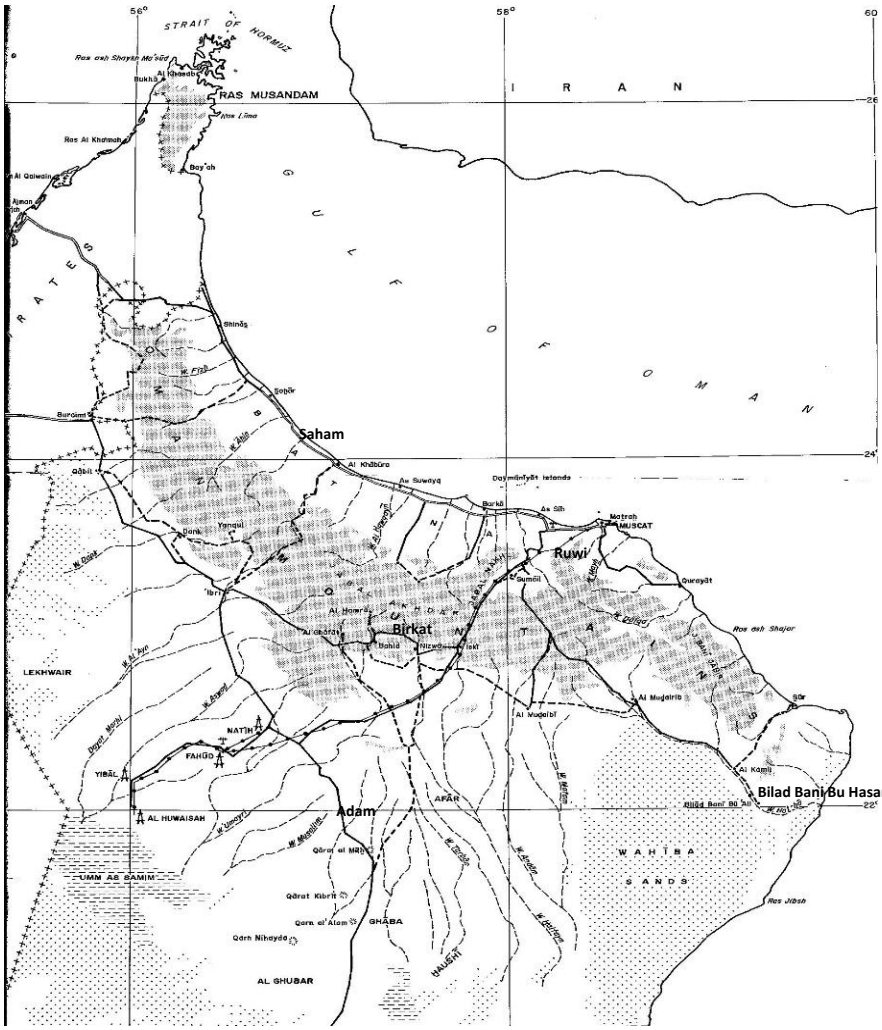

Figure 18 Map of northern Oman in 1972 (copyright Petroleum Development (Oman)).

3. Flying machines

They're all frightfully keen,
those magnificent men in their flying machines.

They can fly upside with their feet in the air,
They don't think of danger, they really don't care.
Newton would think he had made a mistake,
To see those young men and the chances they take.

Song by Ron Goodwin

After I had set out most of the power stations in the interior and along the Batinah coast, it was time to tackle two of the most challenging, Khasab and Bukha. Although I had been to half a dozen very remote sites, I was still unprepared as to what lay in wait in the Musandam peninsular. In former times, the boundaries of Oman had been rather vague, being made up of a series of sheikdoms. Oman had at one time consisted of the coastline all the way to the entrance to the Arabian Gulf, but various interventions by the Portuguese and Persians in the eighteenth century saw individual areas fall under the authority of different sheiks. The Musandam peninsular had now become an exclave of Oman with parts of the emirates of Sharjah and Fujairah and another Omani enclave, Madha, separating the peninsular from the Batinah coast.

As a piece of territory, Musandam was as desolate as almost any on the planet. At that time, there were no paved roads – in fact no roads at all other than local tracks within settlements. The total population of the peninsular was unknown but generally thought to be about one seventh of the current figure, indicating a population of less than 5,000, this number consisting of tribesmen called Shihuh and

trading merchants who crossed the Strait of Hormuz in dhows to trade with Iran and the Emirates. The Shihuh are a wild and little-known tribe of fishermen and herdsmen, speaking two languages, one an Arabic dialect and one Persian. Barren jagged red-hued mountains rise up to a height in excess of 2,000 metres (6,500 feet) above sea level and along the coast, jutting out like fingers into the sea, creating countless fjord-like inlets. The total cultivated area of the peninsular, with an area of 180,000 hectares, is less than 400 hectares (100 acres).

It may seem rather odd that the ultimate aim of the communist rebels in the south of Oman was to seize control of this mountainous and barren peninsular. That is, until one understands the importance of its location on the south side of the Strait of Hormuz, the bendy entrance to the Arabian Gulf which is only 34 km (21 miles) wide at its narrowest point. Even now, with the advent of oil pipelines across Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the Strait is still the world's most important oil chokepoint for shipping and in the mid 1970's it was even more so. Closure of the Strait would quickly result in fuel shortages in the West and be particularly catastrophic for Japan which relied totally on Arabian Gulf oil. There was now an oil boom in the Gulf, with many new developments following on from earlier shortages in the decade, but tensions were brewing in Iran where the Shah and his relatives were creaming off the revenues.

To keep an eye out for any potential invasion or illegal immigrants, the Sultan of Oman's Air Force (SOAF) had a small number of short take-off and landing aircraft to patrol the area, together with a few helicopters. It was important that the people in this desolate location should not be denied the progress being made elsewhere in Oman, hence the provision of the power stations for a relatively small population.

Getting to Khasab, the destination for the first of the three power stations in the exclave of Musandam, was going to be a challenge. Zach had obtained a hand-written letter in Arabic from the ministry outlining the purpose of our visit. We did not have visas to cross into the UAE but were told that if we managed to get a letter from the Wali in Shinas, the northernmost town on the Omani Batinah

Coast, this would be recognized at the border, as his authority covered tribal matters and some of the same tribe lived in Sharjah. We then had to cross through the Emirates of Sharjah and Fujairah, re-enter Oman at Bayah and get to an air force landing strip where we hoped to beg a lift from SOAF to fly us to Khasab. We needed to find the Wali there, agree a location for the power station and then beg another lift back and meet up with our driver again in Bayah. There was clearly the potential for things to go wrong, but the ever-optimistic Mervyn and I set out early one morning in a Land Rover with a driver, the first stop being Shinas. We passed the large town of Sohar which is claimed by some to be the birthplace of Sinbad the Sailor, the legendary hero of the "Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor", one of the most famous tales in the One Thousand and One Nights.[13]

On arriving at Shinas, we were told that the Wali was not in the fort and we spent a frustrating hour waiting until he returned and penned a letter for us. This seemed to do the trick as we entered the UAE without any undue delay enabling us to continue the long drive north, reaching the beautiful bay at Khor Fakkan which provided welcome relief on the long and monotonous journey. Pressing on, we approached the town of Dibba on the border with the Musandam peninsular only to find the unpaved road growing progressively worse, forcing us to divert to the beach, driving along the tidal strip of sand for about a kilometre. Returning to the rough track and asking passers-by for directions, we arrived at a gravel airstrip with a few huts. We now had to beg a lift from the air force. There was no flight planned to go to Khasab that afternoon but one of the pilots agreed to fly us in a Britten-Norman Defender aircraft, a twin prop military version of the better known "Islander" aircraft which had been adapted for aerial surveillance and being capable of carrying small bombs, missiles and a machine gun if necessary.

The young British pilot took an Omani observer with him (he may have been a trainee) and his girlfriend! Well, whoever the young

[13] In fact, Sinbad is a mythical figure, comprising adventures of sailors from different regions over a period of time.

expatriate lady was, he had decided to impress her with his flying skills. The journey from Bayah to Khasab involved flying over the highest mountains in the peninsular so we had to climb quite rapidly to a height of about 7,000 feet to avoid Jabal al Harim. We had cleared the highest mountains when the observer on board pointed to two indistinct dots on the ground. Then, without warning, the pilot suddenly went into a steep dive, picking up speed until the aircraft shuddered. At what seemed about the last moment before hitting the mountain, the pilot pulled out and climbed back to his previous height, before explaining to Mervyn and me that two illegal immigrants had been spotted, probably coming from Iran or Baluchistan (Pakistan). We were not quite sure what the manoeuvre was supposed to achieve but the two illegals continued on their way. The pilot must have felt that he had not achieved the objective of sending the illegals fleeing back to the coast, so once again, without warning, he repeated the procedure. This time his aim was to get them to duck and flee back down the mountain which meant coming very close to the mountain top indeed. When we finally landed, I looked at Mervyn who had turned a sickly green colour and he looked at me, probably looking the same. No words were exchanged as the look between us said it all, but I felt I ought to say something to the pilot and as I scrambled out of the aircraft, I said to him "That was a bit close, wasn't it?" to which he replied "Yes, eight feet!".

Figure 19 Defender aircraft at Khasab

I recall going with the Wali to identify the site for the power station but not much else of that visit has stayed in my memory, being obliterated by the dive-bombing incident. Khasab itself was a small settlement where there was a harbour where traders and fishermen came and went in their boats. The location of the site almost defied belief; behind the settlement was a wide barren valley with steep

sides, the base of the valley being a wadi of boulders and gravel which would flood during a storm. About three kilometres inland, there was a fork in the valley, dividing it into two. We were advised that we could build the power station somewhere in this featureless boulder strewn dry riverbed, presumably on the higher area in the fork. I made a rough sketch, but it was somewhat futile as there were almost no features which I could use to locate any site boundary.

The return trip must have been without incident. The Tarmac quarry manager made a separate visit to determine the location of a "Load-a-screen", a powered contraption which sieved the rocks, sand and gravel into appropriate heaps for making concrete aggregate. He had previously travelled extensively overseas including remote places in Africa where he had picked up a native mistress who he kept in tow. His first trip to Khasab with the air force must have been less traumatic than the one we had just had but he refused point-blank after his first visit to use military transport again, fearing for his life. I, however, needed to return to set out the power station and I felt that any refusal to do so could threaten my overseas career which was just starting to get going. After all, what was the chance of having the same pilot and coming across illegal immigrants again? And in my mid-twenties, I was perhaps more inclined to take risks than someone older and wiser.

We had by now taken delivery of our landing craft, of which I will say more later. I could have gone with this craft from Muscat, but it was going on to Dubai, taking several days just to get to Khasab. As it was not fitted out for passengers, any visitors would need to find a place to sleep on the floor of the first mate's cabin, so I gave it a miss. I sent a second Land Rover with a driver, tent, provisions, steel pins, theodolite and sledgehammer ahead on this craft whilst a driver took me from Ruwi to Bayah where I had to beg a lift with SOAF. My luck was in as they were about to leave on a flight to Khasab in a Defender aircraft. This time there were two British pilots on board and an Omani observer whose chief job was to pass back plastic cups of orange juice to the passengers. As we taxied to the end of the runway, the aircraft started to take an erratic course, zigzagging and turning abruptly. Another passenger and I were a little alarmed - was the pilot drunk?

Finally, an explanation came over the intercom. One of the SOAF helicopter pilots was on board and had asked to have a go at the controls. Fortunately, the regular Defender pilot beside him took over before we took off.

As we flew over the mountains I looked down and spotted little postage stamp areas of green among the red craggy mountains. The mysterious local tribe, the Shihuh, were clinging on to life in these locations, supported by a few goats and the rainwater which had been collected in "wells" or gullies. These gullies fed large stone cisterns known as "birkahs" which are up to a hundred feet wide from which they could supply two crops a year, their food being supplemented by visits to the coast to go fishing in the summer. They lived in cave houses which were partially underground, but I had been warned not to go walking in the mountains if I had the inclination to see these people. They did not take kindly to strangers who might threaten their existence and were prepared to kill them without compunction.

I had a short but anxious wait after landing at Khasab before the Land Rover with my tent and equipment turned up. I had agreed with Mervyn that a penetration soil test would be unnecessary as it would be impossible to get any readings trying to hammer through boulders. We drove across very rough ground and arrived at the fork in the wadi where the power station was to be located. I pitched the tent with the help of the driver and now had to decide on the exact position for the power station. It turned out that this was determined by where I could drive the metal pins into the boulder strewn ground and so it was a question of trial and error, establishing the four corner points. It was hot and although I did not have a thermometer, my guess is that the temperature was approaching 110 degrees Fahrenheit (44 degrees Celsius). Moreover, there was a steady breeze; not a nice cooling sea breeze but an oven-like draft of air coming from the southeast, having been warmed by the baking mountains in front of me. There were no more flights that day, which I had anticipated, hence the requirement for a tent. As dusk approached, the driver went off to the town of Khasab in the Land Rover where he had no doubt arranged some dosshouse accommodation for himself. I made myself

comfortable in my tent. That is, I tried to make myself comfortable. There was nothing much to do after dark and being without electricity, I had an early night. One would expect the temperature to cool down at night and the wind to abate. I suppose that the temperature did drop just a degree or two but the “date ripening” wind was relentless. It was extremely uncomfortable lying in the dark on rocky ground being roasted. At about eleven o’clock that evening, I had had enough but what was I to do?

The town of Khasab was a good three kilometres away along an unlit boulder strewn track. However, I had noticed a contractor’s camp belonging to J & P, the Cypriot contractor, about halfway between my location and the town, so after dressing, I set off in the hope of finding somewhere to sleep. I eventually stumbled across the camp, guided by a light and the hum of a generator. There was, of course, no one to be seen at this hour. I spotted a portable cabin with an air-conditioning unit mounted in the wall and tried the door. As it was unlocked, I peered in, noticing the form of a sleeping person on a bed. The Cypriot awoke as I entered, not un-naturally a little displeased at being disturbed but I refused to leave and settled down on the floor, enjoying the air-conditioned comfort. My companion decided to go back to sleep, and I made sure that I escaped from his bedroom in the morning before he woke up.

I made my way back to the tent and awaited the arrival of the driver, who appeared in due course. The tent was left erected to provide some shade from the sun and every so often, I would emerge and scan the skies for an aircraft. I knew that I had to rush to the airstrip whenever an aircraft arrived to beg a lift before it took off again. A Defender came in at about 10 o’clock and the driver took me to the airstrip as quickly as the boulder strewn track would permit. No luck, the plane was parked but all but one of the crew had returned to the huts which served as a base, some half a kilometre or so away. The remaining crew member was tinkering with one of the wheels, telling me that there would be a delay as he was trying to fix the brakes. Shortly after, he also returned to the base. I suppose that military airmen in general have a particular way of doing things: they will sit

around for hours playing cards or gossiping and then decide that it is time for action, whereupon everything must be undertaken at breakneck speed. The driver and I returned to the tent and kept watch, knowing that the second I could see a Land Rover leaving the military base, I had to get to the landing strip as quickly as possible. My attention could not be diverted for even half a minute so the possibility of re-erecting the tent closer to the airstrip did not occur to me as I hoped that I would not have long to wait.

An hour later I spotted a Land Rover leaving the base and we rushed back to the landing strip. The airman had started fiddling with the brakes again. “We can’t leave until the brakes are fixed” he told me as he struggled with a spanner. “How long do you think it will take?” I enquired to which he responded, “Probably about an hour”. I would know when they were about to take off as the remainder of the crew would dash at top speed from their base, so I returned to my tent once more, keeping a close watch on the distant air force base, which at a distance shimmered in the heat. After a while, I could no longer see the pilot who was fixing the brakes – he had returned to the base. It was not until about 2pm that afternoon that I spotted the SOAF Land Rover leave the base at top speed, bouncing up and down on the rough gravel road. The driver and I headed back to the runway once more to be met with the very disappointing news – the brakes had not been fixed and there was little prospect of them being fixed that day. The pilot, perhaps feeling sorry for me, said “Never mind, we have an emergency back-up brake, so I can give it a shot.” I found myself in the Defender (I was the only passenger), waving goodbye to the Land Rover driver, both relieved to be leaving and somewhat apprehensive about the condition of the aircraft.

The flight was uneventful until we approached our destination which was obviously going to be the moment of truth regarding the brakes. As we were about to touch down at Bayah, a donkey which had been grazing at the side of the landing strip decided to walk across the middle of the runway and then pause as if to say, “See if you can stop!”. We made the shortest landing I have ever known, grinding to a halt just in time.

The driver who had taken me from Ruwi to Bayah was not to be seen – he would naturally have been waiting for the ten o'clock flight which did not take place, and I therefore had to walk to the settlement at Bayah to find him. This was three or four kilometres distant, and I set off, knowing that Taylor Woodrow had a contractor's camp on the way there. After half an hour walking in the blistering heat, I arrived at the camp, unshaven, unwashed, in sweat-stained dirty clothing and covered in dust. It was a little after 3pm in the afternoon and I desperately needed a cool drink, preferably a beer. The contractor's staff were not to be seen, presumably working on the nearby construction site, but I headed for a building which looked as if it contained the recreation facilities. I opened the door to find that the room was empty, except for a barman who was behind the bar, getting things ready to serve the expats in another hour or so. I shambled to the bar and propped myself up on the counter. The barman turned around, surprised to see me. "Where have you come from?" he demanded. "Khasab" I gasped. He eyed me briefly before retorting "Did you walk?".

* *

I mentioned earlier that we had a landing craft named MV Tarmac which had been purchased to service the sites at Khasab and Bukha, there being no road access to either place. Two expatriates were recruited for this craft, the captain Duncan and first mate John, together with three or four third world crew to serve as deputy mates and a cook. Duncan, from Scotland, had spent most of his life at sea and had survived two shipwrecks which had made him somewhat paranoid when it came to the positioning of his vessel in any sort of perceived danger.

My duties at Ruwi initially included acting as radio operator and the landing craft was equipped with a radio transmitter, enabling us to keep track of where the landing craft was on its travels. One afternoon, shortly before the end of my shift as radio operator, I detected a very faint message with an Asian accent. The radio was normally only used by expatriates and this message seemed to be a desperate cry for help.

Duncan and John had been arrested and one of the crew had had the presence of mind to use the radio to make contact. Duncan had occupied a berth in Dubai which he had been allocated. A sheik had arrived in his yacht and demanded the berth and Duncan had refused to leave which was more than a little unwise. The furious sheik had Duncan arrested but this had been done without notifying the British Embassy or Tarmac. The police in Dubai were astonished when they were approached to release Duncan and John, believing that no-one knew of the unlawful arrest.

Bukha was not served regularly by SOAF and we needed to undertake soil tests, there being no other option than to go by landing craft. A Land Rover with soil testing rig was put on the craft, along with a tent for the four labourers who had to sleep on the deck whilst John graciously allowed me to share his cabin. The trip was to take several days and involved a stop in Khasab where we unloaded some materials and invited the Wali on board. There was not a great deal to see on the voyage, but I do remember seeing venomous sea snakes and a glide of flying fish skimming over the waves which I found quite exciting. I had been asked by Paul to undertake a survey of the harbour for a bid he was preparing, and I had therefore also taken a level and staff for this purpose. To undertake the survey, I waited until low tide when the depth in the harbour was less than two metres, sending one of the labourers into the water so that I could take readings of the harbour floor at different points. I tried not to convey my nervousness to the labourer and worked as quickly as possible, fearing that he might be attacked by a shark or bitten by a sea snake. Much to my relief, he survived unharmed, and I was able to provide a grid of levels for what turned out to be an unsuccessful bid. Little did I know then that I was to return to Bukha later, and the anguish that place would cause to all concerned. But before that time, I had some other sites to attend to.

Figure 20A MV Tarmac, the landing craft

Figure 20B Flying fish (creatures of the world Wikia)

4. Marooned

They placed their ears to the ground
to pick up the slightest sound
A nomad family was in the desert marooned
for days at the mercy of the sun and moon
They hoped for a caravan or a camel cart to pass
that could help deliver them from their morass

Marooned - Poem by Sandra Martyres

At any given time, perhaps six or seven of the nineteen sites would be under construction by Tarmac. This was too many for the number of foremen we had, so I was pressed into service to undertake the initial works at some of the sites. Acting as a supervisor to a site based Pakistani or Indian foreman, I travelled from Ruwi, visiting each site as necessary. Many of the sites were on the Batinah coast with its narrow band of date palms bordering the Gulf of Oman, the palms petering out into desert and then the maroon-coloured Al Hajar mountains to the west. The palms provided fronds from which Omani fishermen constructed small canoe-like boats to go fishing near the coast. These palm fronds were also used to make flimsy houses called barusti which dotted the landscape. Those who were not fishermen either survived by growing tomatoes, limes, bananas and carrots, harvesting the dates or herding goats among the scrub.

One of the early construction sites on the Batinah coast was located at the boundary where the desert meets the date palms and farms at As Suwayq. Production of the graded stones for the concrete, known as “aggregate”, was already taking place about two kilometres from the site. The “Load-a -screen” plant was serviced with a powerful Caterpillar hydraulic front-end loader with a large bucket, the excavated sand and gravel being sieved into piles of different sized stones and sand. Following my earlier soil tests, the penetration test results indicated that the ground under the power station foundations needed compaction, this being achieved by means of a huge towed

smooth-wheeled roller weighing about 10 tons. There was just one Grove hydraulic crane to service all the sites and this was required elsewhere, so the challenge was to unload the roller from the truck on site without the assistance of a crane. Once offloaded, the powerful Caterpillar front-end loader could then pull the roller several times across the site, thus achieving the required compaction after which the roller could somehow be put back on the flatbed truck and returned to Ruwi.

There were just two possibilities to transfer the roller, the first being to construct a ramp up to the height of the truck enabling the roller to be pulled off. The second was to dig a deep hole, one side with a slope of about forty-five degrees and the other end with as vertical a face as possible. The truck would then back down the ramp, enabling the roller to be pulled off at ground level. Each option had pros and cons and after discussing these with a colleague, I concluded that the second option was preferable, provided that the loader was powerful enough to help pull the truck up the slope after the roller had been taken off. So, a large hole needed to be dug with one vertical face and the other end sloping to form a ramp A seemingly suitable spot was selected about thirty metres outside the site boundary for the ramp. Although this was outside the land allocated for the power station, it looked as if it was unused, with piles of stones covering the area.

Whilst I returned to Ruwi each evening, this luxury was not afforded to the workmen in the advance party who had to camp in tents near to the site. After the first night, I arrived to find a barrage of complaints from the men who had encountered snakes in their tents that night. Most snakes in Oman are harmless and are species such as the sand snake which I believed these to be. There are, however, some very venomous snakes in the viper family which can have a fatal bite. The men, quite naturally, didn't like sharing their tents with snakes so I had to quickly arrange some groundsheets in addition to the mats which they used to bed down on. Scorpion stings could also be very painful and are far more common than snake bites. Expats often feared camel spiders the most as they liked to hide under toilet seats and vehicles; anywhere which provided shade. The spiders could be up

to 16cm (6 inches) long and could give a painful, but usually non-fatal bite. These particular spiders are carnivores who use digestive fluids to liquefy their victims' flesh, making it easy to suck the remains into their stomachs. They can also move incredibly fast, reaching speeds of 10mph. It was customary, therefore, to check for unwanted wildlife, particularly at night, both in tents and cabins and there was always a feeling of apprehension in the toilet and shower areas.

The day of the arrival of the roller approached and I instructed the foreman, Iqbal, who I knew well from previous expeditions, to excavate the ramp which was needed to back the truck down to offload the roller. I returned to Ruwi to arrange the loading of the roller onto a truck using the derrick in the yard to lift it, as well as organising the delivery of materials and provisions to make up a full load. The following morning, I set off to As Suwayq and was greeted by Iqbal who told me there had been a problem. They had just started excavating the ramp when a passing local Omani rushed over to stop them. We had made a grave mistake (pun intended) for unknown to us, the stones we had seen on the surface marked burial sites and we were excavating the local graveyard. Fortunately, the local Wali decided not to take any action against us and Iqbal and his men spent a couple of hours putting the stones back in position as best as they could recall before excavating the ramp in a grave-free location.

As Mervyn was short of foremen, he had already used another site engineer, Richard, as a project manager. Richard who had arrived about a year after my arrival had initially helped with the setting out and site establishment of the few sites I had not surveyed but was then assigned the management of the site at Shinas, the furthest site along the Al Batinah coast. It was now my turn to be a project manager as well as site engineer and I was dispatched to the site at Saham which lay between the Al Khabura and Shinas sites. I was based with Bert who was the foreman at Al Khabura, sharing the site accommodation facilities and travelling to and from the site at Saham each day.

The labour we used was multi-cultural – many from Pakistan and India, a few Somali carpenters and a token force of Omanis from the locality where we were building. There was one particular group

who caused problems, and they were the Pathans, otherwise known as Pashtun people or ethnic Afghans, who either came from Afghanistan or from the adjacent Pakistani border area. The Pathans have always valued their independence and freedom having seen off at various times the Mughals, Sikhs, British, Russians and more recently an international force comprising soldiers from eighteen countries (but largely US and British). They are fearless guerrilla fighters and by their nature would always be involved in fights, being warriors who were easily insulted. They had left their AK47s, hand grenades, rocket launchers, pistols and other weaponry back in Pakistan and Afghanistan for their sons to play with, but no doubt still carried knives. More alarming was their code of conduct which requires every insult to be avenged, if necessary, with one's life. Even the slightest insult would be returned with interest and any insult on a Pathan's tribe or his family (particularly his wife or wives) would almost certainly be fatal. The site foremen found them to be almost uncontrollable and constantly involved in fights, but if their energy was harnessed in the right way, they worked harder than any other workmen. Richard had done a great job in forming a concrete block-making gang with the Pathans and he had now completed the block-making at his site and was prepared to release these men. It obviously made sense to continue with the previous arrangement which was "job and finish" with a target for making a fixed quantity of blocks each day and so I set off on the journey to Shinas to collect this gang of four Pathans.

The leader of the gang sat beside me in the Land Rover, his three members in the back. As I drove back to Saham, the leader asked if he could smoke, it being obvious to me that this was just a courtesy and that he intended to smoke his "Black Cats" anyway. I then noticed that we were running low on petrol and decided to fill up at one of the roadside filling stations on the way. This station had a small generator which could power the single pump which looked to be of 1950's vintage, having a clock face to indicate the fuel dispensed. My companion jumped out to undertake the task of filling up as soon as we came to a halt and I then got out of the vehicle, this proving to be

a very wise move. The gang leader had already removed the petrol cap and had started filling the tank when I noticed the vapour from the tank rising upwards in the heat. I followed the shimmering cloud until my sight rested on the face of my companion and the lit stub of the cigarette between his lips. Moving like grease lightning, I plucked the cigarette from his lips and threw it away from the Land Rover in one swift movement. I must have had only a second to spare before we were all toast!

Now it must be said that my talent lay more as an engineer and logistics manager than as a project manager of a site where managing, and to some extent training, a third world workforce of different nationalities and cultures was a requirement. At the start on site each morning, there would be those who needed to attend the local clinic and I would then give my Land Rover to a local driver, a driver to do this and if he did not turn up (he was a local man) I had to perform this function myself which meant I couldn't undertake other tasks. On one occasion, a local Omani wanted to attend the clinic and as I had to drive, I told him to wait while I attended to other matters. He became quite irate at the delay, and I had the impression that he was about to plunge the curved dagger he was carrying into me, so I had to quickly accede to his request.

There were other challenges which I had to address, well outside my comfort zone. There had been some thefts from the tents with accusations being made between the different groups in the workforce. Involving the local police was not a good idea as it would just throw a spotlight on our activities and could lead to expulsions and all sorts of dire consequences. Deliberating on the best course of action to take, I decided to undertake, with the site foreman, a thorough search of each tent and the belongings therein. The whole experience was upsetting and inevitably, I did not find any of the missing items.

Figure 21 L-R. Iqbal, Omani driver and Indian foreman

Figure 22 Block making machine. Main concrete mixer and accommodation block in background

Figure 23 Site accommodation unit at As Suwayq

Every evening after my return to Al Khabura, I would eat my dinner with Bert the foreman, the meal being served by our Baluchi cook and housekeeper, Bala. On one occasion, we were joined by Len the fitter who travelled between the sites. Len had come from Izki where foreman Ron was based and told us that Ron was not very well. It was thought that he had contracted hepatitis and Mervyn had suggested that he return to Ruwi where there was an expatriate clinic, but Ron had declined. For the next few days, we asked after Ron and then heard that he was extremely ill, and that Mervyn had sent a Land Rover to the Izki site with firm instructions that Ron was to come back to Ruwi. Ron was too ill to sit in the vehicle and was placed on a mattress in the back of the pickup where he died on the journey back. Ron's death cast a shadow over all of us for the next few days.

Construction plant was shared between the various sites, and it was necessary to wait for a JCB excavator to dig the foundations of the power station. I found the wait somewhat frustrating and was pleased to hear that I was finally to receive the excavator the following

morning and that it would be driven to my site overnight. The next morning, there was no sign of the excavator, and I wondered what had happened to it. For a while, no one seemed to know but by the afternoon I heard that it had been involved in an accident. The safe driving speed at night for a JCB excavator was about 35mph and because of the distance involved, it set off the previous night along the coast road which was by now substantially complete. There were frequent wadi crossings where the road dips out of sight to cross the normally dry riverbed and the JCB was hidden in the depression of one of these at the time of the accident. Two Swedish expats were driving their car at about 70 to 80mph along the road and only saw the JCB at the last moment as they entered the wadi crossing. Both were killed instantly as their vehicle slammed into the JCB, damaging the rear arm of the backhoe. The JCB driver was taken into custody pending a police investigation and released after about two days without charge, being allowed to continue his journey to Saham, still a little shaken. I hoped that the bodies of the Swedes had been extricated from their mangled car, knowing that the Omani police and rudimentary fire service did not have sophisticated cutting equipment. In the case of nasty accidents, where the vehicle had been crushed or set on fire, they would commandeer an excavator to dig a large hole at the side of the road, pushing the wreckage with the remains of the casualties into the excavation and backfilling it.

On each construction site, there was a large concrete mixer which was hand-fed with sand, aggregate and cement. Mine broke down one day which stopped all further progress with the foundations and asking for a fitter to come to repair the mixer, I was told that they were, apparently, all engaged elsewhere, forcing me to wait impatiently. I was becoming increasingly frustrated as the days passed, but it was only after about a week that I was finally advised that a fitter was on the way. The fitter duly arrived that afternoon and I had a mixture of elation and disappointment when I saw that it was Stuart, knowing that he would cheer me up, but that, given his reputation, he might not be able to fix the mixer. However, I was in luck, and he did manage to repair the mixer just before dusk fell.

A major concrete pour for the substructure had been waiting for a week and I was desperate to get things moving, telling the workman to get ready. It was about 10pm when we were ready to commence the pour, which would take about four hours to complete. If we undertook the pour that night, we could then do another the following morning and desperate to make up for lost time, I told the foreman to prepare for a long night. For some reason, the workforce was not particularly happy with my decision to work most of the night and a key player in the operation, the dumper driver, refused to work. No one else could apparently drive the dumper (or would admit to being able to drive it). I decided that although I had never driven a dumper before, I would have a go. The concrete pour went ahead with me driving the dumper by the light of some floodlights, narrowly avoiding ending in the excavation which we were concreting on more than one occasion.

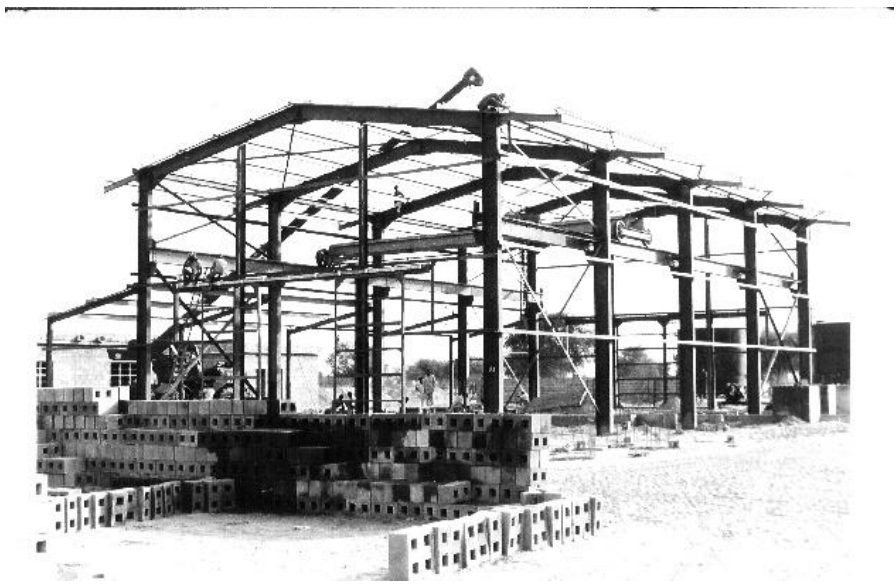

Figure 24 Erecting the steel frame of the power station

As work progressed, the crane arrived for the steel erection which for a change, seemed to go smoothly. I then had an instruction from Mervyn to find a sheep as a gift for the site labour. I forget which festival we were celebrating but it was either Easter or more probably

Eid al-Adha, a Muslim holiday when a sheep is sacrificed. I had to buy and donate a sheep – simple I thought. But none of the local sheep owners wanted to sell me a sheep as they regarded them as more valuable alive than dead! Eventually, the local headman I employed on site, as a supervisor for the driver and watchmen, agreed to sell me one of his sheep, just before the festival, much to my relief, but at what I considered to be quite a high price. I did not hang around to see the sheep slaughtered and prepared having previously witnessed the killing of a goat when a new crushing plant was commissioned in the Muscat area. Animals can often sense when they are about to be slaughtered.

Figure 25 Choosing the sheep. Omani headman on left, cook on right

Figure 26 Workmen at Saham with sheep

Travelling from Al Khabura to Saham early each morning, I experienced the early morning mist which blanketed the coastal area, the date palms protruding above the ground-hugging layer of mist which would quickly evaporate as the sun rose. Under such circumstances, it was necessary to keep one's eyes peeled for camels, donkeys and people crossing the road. However, it was in the evening on the unlit coast road that Bert was involved in an accident. He normally used a driver, but on this occasion, he was driving himself on the newly completed road, which was raised on embankments in places, making it difficult to spot anything at the roadside. A camel had

run up the embankment just in front of Bert's Land Rover without any warning and he had hit and killed the animal, overturning his Land Rover in the process. It was fortunate that he had hit the animal on the legs; accidents where the animal is hit between the front and rear legs often being fatal for the driver as the weight of the camel then collapses onto the cab of the vehicle crushing the occupants. Bert was shaken but otherwise not badly injured, although he was unable to work, being under "house arrest" until the trial – he was fortunate not to be locked up in the local police cells. Camels have owners and killing a camel is a serious offence, so Bert was very nervous. I spent some time visiting the local magistrates' offices on Bert's behalf and was surprised to find a British lawyer who was helping the Omani Government establish their justice system. Zacharia sent one of his local assistants from Ruwi to represent Bert and the trial commenced about ten days after the incident.

Bert delighted in narrating the courtroom drama which he witnessed. The owner of the camel made representations, presumably stating that he needed full compensation, and that Bert was entirely to blame for the accident, but before Tarmac's representative could stand up and make a plea for mitigating circumstances, Bert's regular driver stood up and made a speech lasting about ten minutes. Being in Arabic, Bert had little idea as to what was being said and was surprised when, following this speech, the trial was abruptly terminated, enabling Bert to walk free, with Tarmac paying some compensation. Bert's driver must have put in a good word (or many good words) for him. Shortly after this, Bert was transferred to the distant site at Al Kamil which had recently commenced at a revised location better suited to the one for a power station than the one I had originally surveyed and abandoned after my confrontation with a well owner.

Having completed the erection of the steel frame at my site, there was one further operation to be undertaken before the crane was sent to the next location, Bert's new site at Al Kamil. The power station accommodation block which was constructed from blockwork needed a flat concrete roof. Mervyn and I had discussed the best way

of forming this and to avoid the need for a large amount of supporting formwork to cast the sections of roof, we had come up with a plan to cast the roof sections on the ground close to the accommodation block and then use the crane to lift them into place. It was now time for the precast sections to be lifted into place before the crane left for good. Lifting inserts had been cast into the slabs to enable lifting cables to be attached but the size and weight of the precast slabs was such that it was on the limit of the lifting ability of the crane before it started to overturn. I cursed the idiots who had come up with this solution as I struggled to get the units into place whilst the crane threatened to overturn on each occasion when we started to lift the slabs which we tried to roll nearer to the place where they were needed. It was a very stressful day before all the roof was in place and I could send the crane to Bert.

A few days later, I received a radio message from Bert telling me that I had not sent the webbing lifting slings needed to lift the pieces of steelwork for the power station frame. Puzzled, as I was certain I had sent them with the crane, I conducted an unsuccessful search at the Saham site to look for them. Bert, who was about to go on leave, reported the situation to Mervyn, two or three days after advising me. Mervyn sounded more than a little irritated when he called me and told me that I had better sort it out. Deciding to leave my site at Saham, I gave instructions to the foreman as to the work to do in my absence, before travelling all the way to Ruwi to collect some more lifting slings, only managing to find two old ones. I then immediately travelled on to Al Kamil, a further six hours' journey. By now, Bert had already been absent from the site for over three days, having gone on leave. I dreaded what I would find when I arrived, the steelwork having been delayed for nearly two weeks and the men no doubt sitting around, doing nothing and feeling mutinous.

As I approached the site, I was amazed to see a steel portal frame in the distance. How had the crane driver managed to erect the frame, which from a distance looked to be almost complete, without any lifting slings? On arrival, I immediately walked up to the crane driver and asked him if everything was OK. "Everything fine Sahib" he

responded. “Have you got all the slings you need?” I asked. I was again assured that everything was fine. The site foreman, Iqbal, then took me to one side and explained what had happened. Bert tended to let his frustrations boil over, at which point he would often swear and curse. The crane driver had taken exception to this and went on strike by saying that he could not erect the steelwork because he did not have any lifting slings, having hidden these items. As soon as Bert left the site to go on leave, the missing slings were “found” and work resumed. After a quick meal break, I set off on my way back to Ruwi and Saham.

Back in Saham, I inspected the cladding of the frame which had just commenced, being somewhat alarmed to find toe-curling breaches of safety, with one workman sitting on the shoulders of another who was standing on a scaffold to access the top fixings. I decided to patrol the site with increased vigilance and a few days later as I was doing my round, I entered every room of the accommodation block to check the work and ensure that no-one was shirking. I found one man, an Omani, sleeping on the floor and shouted at him to wake him up. The man got up looking rather dazed and confused at which point the site foreman hurriedly arrived to tell me off. The poor man was the night watchman, and I had disturbed him in the daytime! Despite the mishaps and challenges, I had enjoyed much of my time at Saham which, after about five months was coming to an end, but I now looked forward to resuming what had been my normal duties. Little did I realise that Mervyn had other plans for me which were to test my limits of endurance.

* *

Bukha was the most inaccessible of the nineteen sites; situated in the Musandam peninsular between Khasab and Ras al Khaimah in the UAE, it could only be reached by landing craft. There was a gravel runway but there were no regular SOAF flights so flying to the site was not an option and besides, all our materials needed to be brought in by sea. The “Load-a-screen” and shovel had already been taken there from Khasab and Mervyn wanted me to set up the site, construct the

drains for the accommodation block and supervise the production of the concrete aggregates before a more permanent site supervisor could be based there. I set off from Muscat with a dozen men, site cabins, a truck, water tanks and tower, a generator, 45-gallon drums of diesel, hand-tools and tents. I was to be based at Bukha until my leave was due, which meant a stay of about a month. During the trip, the men camped on the deck of the landing craft under tents, and I spent my time mostly on the bridge. As we rounded the Strait of Hormuz, I gazed at the impressive cliffs and jagged inlets of the peninsular, noting that the weather was worsening. Although the weather remained dry, the wind had made the sea rough which was not what we wanted for the landing on the beach, there being no suitable harbour or berth for our landing craft at Bukha. The loading shovel driver who was already on site spotted our arrival and drove the shovel to the beach; our hour had come.

As the craft approached the shallow beach, the wind whipped up the surf and the captain, Duncan, became increasingly concerned for the safety of his craft. He did not wish to drive the boat right up to the shore, which meant there was water between the ramp of the craft and the beach. The swell was lifting and dropping the craft on the bottom of the seabed with a dull thump, which sent Duncan into apoplectic cries, being convinced that he was about to endure his third shipwreck. A very thick rope was strung between the loading shovel and the landing craft to try to keep the position stable, as we desperately tried to unload the vehicles and drag the cabins onto the beach.

The three-stranded braided rope would be pulled taught every time there was a wave and then slacken and I feared that the force of the repeated tightening might break it. Then it happened; one of the three strands snapped. When a rope snaps, whiplash occurs, the resulting flying strands of rope being easily capable of killing or maiming someone in the vicinity. We were down to two strands and Duncan was going berserk, as we desperately hurried to pull off the remaining cabins. It was touch and go – if the rope snapped, Duncan could not hold the craft in position, and we would be without some of

the cabins and supplies we desperately needed to set up the site. By some miracle, we managed to get everything off as Duncan, whose patience had run out, started to reverse the craft back out to sea. We now had to drag the cabins with the shovel up the rough track to the site, which was situated on a hill above the beach. I was amazed that the cabins stayed intact – the Ruwi workshop had done a good welding job and my design meant that there were no tiles or other loose fittings to fall off (the dining table, seating bench and bed were built in).

The priority for the remainder of the afternoon was to get the generator set up, fill the water tank and dig a soakaway in the rocky ground, connected with a pipe to the cabin toilet – the now ubiquitous portable chemical toilets were not common on construction sites at that time. I was relieved to hear the generator splutter into life – I would be able to sleep with air-conditioning. The following day, the camp construction was completed, enabling screening operations to commence in the wadi, about two kilometres distant and allowing me some time to look around. The town of Bukha was very small and had little of interest to me; the only building of note besides a distant ruined fort was a clinic, the lack of cultivated land providing very little greenery. Looking down at the settlement from the hill where the power station was to be situated, I could see a gravel runway and a cemetery occupying the base of the valley. Further down the hill was a whitewashed house and what appeared to be a lookout post, but there was nothing in the immediate vicinity of the construction site, situated as it was on a barren foothill of the mountainous terrain.

The third day dawned but there were hardly any workmen to be seen. Asking where my workforce had vanished, the foreman replied that most of them were ill and had gone to the local clinic, being ferried by truck or walking themselves. I therefore had to console myself with the knowledge that at least the screening operation was continuing and, in the meantime, decided to explore my immediate surroundings, having observed a military pickup visiting the white house lower down the hill which needed further investigation. A “retired” British major in his sixties or early seventies lived there; that is, he should have retired but hadn’t! He had obviously decided

that the only life he knew was a military one and was apparently employed by the Sultan's forces to keep an eye on things at Bukha and report back to the base at Khasab. He had to some extent "gone native" and seemed happy to live in this isolated place, communicating by radio and receiving the occasional visitors. He gave me a map which was at the scale of a half inch to the mile, showing a number of tiny settlements which had question marks against the name as it seemed no one knew for sure what their correct name was. This map was not of any great use to me, as there were no roads out of Bukha, except one track which had been hewn from the cliffs next to the bay and which served an adjoining settlement, where I was told that Taylor Woodrow had a construction site.

Figure 27 Bukha site set up - day 2

The major clearly didn't have much time for civilian contractors and preferred military people. During my stay at Bukha, I only had a meal with him once when some visitors arrived, and that was because he wanted me to peel the potatoes! A day or so later, I set off after work over the rough coastal track to find the Taylor Woodrow camp and encounter three expatriates who were stationed there. At least, I

thought, I will have some company from time to time - things could be worse.

However, my cautious optimism was misplaced, and it was not long before further disaster struck. Not only did the ill workmen take longer than I expected to recover but the loading shovel punctured a tyre which proved to be beyond repair. With little work happening on site, I now had to accept that the production of concrete aggregates was halted. This meant that I needed to radio Ruwi and ask for the landing craft to deliver another tyre, but I was to find that Bukha was on the limit of radio reception, and it was two or three days before I managed to get through. I was promised that a replacement tyre with other equipment and supplies would be sent, hopefully when the landing craft could be dispatched in a further four- or five-days' time. But the sky was darkening, both metaphorically and physically as a big storm threatened, the rain lashing down all night long and into the following day. The tracks around Bukha became ponds for a while and I was then informed by the major that a landslip had occurred on the coastal track to the next settlement and that it was now impassable.

The Taylor Woodrow expats had more problems of their own. They had the use of a light aircraft which flew in from the UAE and I envied them, until I saw this aircraft take off from the landing strip. Having been alerted one morning by the sound of the plane taxiing and with little to occupy myself, I decided to have a look at it taking off towards the bay. As it reached the halfway point along the runway, it seemed to lose speed and started to brake but was unable to stop before the end of the runway, drifting into the cemetery beyond, bobbing up and down over the grave mounds. I was too far away to conduct any rescue and was relieved to see the pilot and passenger escaping from the cockpit, clambering about two metres to the ground. The crashed plane now prevented the runway from being used from the seaward side and to use it in the other direction meant an aircraft would need to climb rapidly to avoid the mountain range.

Figure 28 The view from the power station site

I finally managed to contact Ruwi again a day or so later, once the atmospheric conditions had improved, to be told that Paul had decided to send the landing craft to Salalah in the south where the civil war was being fought. He had struck a lucrative deal with the armed forces to transport equipment and supplies and that took priority over my needs. This decision meant it would be at least another ten to twelve days before the landing craft could offload, return to Ruwi, load the tyre and other equipment and materials I so desperately needed, and arrive at Bukha. I started to fret, both about the lack of progress and also about my leave. Tarmac paid for a return trip to the UK every six months, and I sometimes took the opportunity to claim this fare and pay a little extra to stop over somewhere interesting on the journey back. On this occasion, I had decided to stop off in Rome for a few days and had booked my ticket accordingly. I felt I had deserved my leave, having spent months away from civilisation at Saham and now at Bukha. It was starting to look rather doubtful if I would be able

to make it unless I could find another way to leave Bukha, as the landing craft would not arrive in time to get me back to Ruwi.

Without the production of aggregate to make concrete and the provision of further equipment and supplies, the reduced labour force was limited to scratching around with shovels. It was a very demoralising time for all of us and because of the blocked road, I had no one to share my problems with. I would spend some of the time sitting and staring at the impressive view, the bay sweeping in an arc to my left, the red and yellow ochre limestone mountains plunging down to the sea and the seemingly lifeless settlement straight ahead. I had been told that a hammerhead shark had been spotted in the sea, just off the coast, but I was too far away from the sea to observe any marine life. Every day was “Groundhog Day”. In the story of the film of that name, an obnoxious television weather forecaster, Phil, goes to the small American town of Punxsutawney where a rodent (a marmot called a groundhog) is used to predict the arrival of spring. Forced to stay overnight in a hotel in the town by an unexpected snowstorm, Phil is desperate to get home as soon as he can, only to discover he is trapped in a time loop that no one else is seemingly aware of. Every morning, he wakes up to his radio clock alarm which plays "I Got You Babe". Phil realizing that there are no consequences for his actions with each day repeating becomes unconcerned about the feelings of others, then becomes reckless after which he becomes depressed being stuck in the loop, leading to him to find ways to commit suicide to end the loop. With even this course of action failing, he then very gradually starts to go on a journey of self-improvement and when the loop finally ends many years later, he has learned to totally accept his surroundings and those around him.

Despite not having to hear Sonny and Cher’s "I Got You Babe" on the radio alarm each morning, I seemed to be following Phil’s journey. I had little concern for the plight of the workforce who must have been almost as frustrated as I was, being wrapped up in my own problems. Sometime later, I was to enter the “reckless” stage, verging on the suicidal as will shortly become apparent. I did not have my eight favourite record tracks, a luxury item, or a good book to keep me

company.[14] Perhaps the Animals track “We've Gotta Get Out Of This Place” would have been appropriate as one of the choices for my “desert island”, as I thought about how I could escape. I was starting to “go round the bend”.

From 1864 to 1869, a small football-pitch sized island known as Jazirat al Maqlab, or “Telegraph Island” was used as a repeater station for the telegraphic signals between London and Bombay. The island, less than 50 km (31 miles) from my location in Bukha, lies a few kilometres east of Khasab in a fjord-like inlet. The island was chosen because it was not frequented by the potentially dangerous Shihu tribe that lives on the peninsular. For five years after the telegraphy was decommissioned, British soldiers continued to man the isolated outpost. Reportedly, every single man stationed at the outpost “around the bend” of the Strait of Hormuz completely lost his mind from the monotony and heat. The relief crews on their mercy missions coined the expression “going round the bend” to describe their voyage to replace the madmen and in due course suffer the same fate. The expression has since become Oman’s contribution to English idioms.

My plans to go on leave appeared to be doomed, the bi-weekly trips to see the major always receiving the same reply; that there were no movements planned by SOAF. One day, I finally had some good news – the landing craft had arrived back from Salalah and was about to set sail with a replacement tyre and a fitter called Eric. Eric had been somewhat homesick from the day he arrived in Oman, and I wondered how he would take to the voyage. The landing craft would, however, arrive too late to enable me to take my leave. I visited the major again, my last chance before the deadline expired if there was to be any possibility of my making my flight to Rome. He also had some good news – a helicopter drop was planned for the following day at 10am. If I arranged to be at a location near his house, there was a possibility I could get a lift, but it depended on the pilot and the major stipulated very clearly that he could make no promises.

[14] A reference to the BBC radio 4 programme “Desert Island Discs”

I waited the following day, suitcase in hand, as the chopper descended, a crewman exiting with supplies whilst the pilot kept the rotors turning. I didn't wait for an invitation, and head down to avoid the rotor downwash, beetled across the gravel, clambered on board and asked if the pilot could take me to Khasab. "I can take you", he told me, "but first of all I have to make two drops on the way". After we took off, I had to ask a further favour of the crew, "Can you radio your base and get a message to Malcolm who is the Irish foreman on the power station site?". "Would you ask him to meet me on arrival?". I hoped that the resourceful Malcolm would have established good relations with the military, and they would contact him. The two drops which we made were in locations where it was impossible to land, being on rocky promontories and as we hovered above the drop zone, the winch man lowered the supplies which I assumed were necessities for small communities of tribesmen. As the helicopter rose after each drop, it banked steeply at about forty-five degrees as it manoeuvred its way to avoid the mountains.

Eventually, we approached Khasab, the chopper entering the valley where the town is situated. The strong winds which funnel down the valley buffeted the aircraft in an alarming manner and the pilot took evasive action, which entailed flying to within a few metres of the near-vertical, red-coloured cliffs forming the valley sides, the ride being both alarming and exhilarating. I was relieved to see Malcolm on landing, although I was somewhat puzzled to observe a JCB excavator also in attendance. All was revealed when Malcolm told me "My Land Rover has a flat battery, and this is the only transport I have available". My suitcase was duly placed in the front bucket and Malcolm and I rode shotgun, clinging on for our lives as the driver took us the one and a half kilometres to the site over the bumpy track. Getting to Khasab was only part of my journey and being stranded in Khasab was only a little better than my fate in Bukha. I needed to get to Seeb airport and had only a few hours to spare. My change in fortune was holding out – a SOAF transport plane was due to arrive at Khasab and pick up some crew before immediately returning to Seeb. I needed to

keep my eyes peeled for the incoming aircraft which, once sighted would require a dash to the airfield.

Malcolm spotted it first, a box shaped Short Skyvan aircraft, camouflaged to make visibility difficult against the mountainous background. He now had to contact the excavator driver who was working about fifty metres away, to come and pick me up. Every second seemed like a minute until the excavator finally arrived. It was a race to get to the landing strip before the aircraft took off and with my suitcase in the front bucket once more, it was another shotgun ride, the excavator bucking like a bronco as we sped at about 20mph towards the destination.

As we closed in on the airfield, my heart sank. The rear ramp of the Skyvan aircraft had closed and the plane was starting to taxi to the far end of the runway. There was now no way I could make it, having come within a whisker of making my escape to Rome. It was too much for my brain to take in. I extricated my suitcase from the bucket and started to run, not towards the aircraft which would have been futile as it was by now halfway to the far end of the runway, but to the other end of the runway almost opposite my position. A rational person would have considered four options apart from the obvious one which would be to give up any attempt to board and to wave goodbye to the aircraft. One – the aircraft takes off directly over my head leaving me to curse my misfortune. Two – the pilot, distracted by my presence aborts the take-off but fails to stop in time, the whirling propellers chopping me into pieces. The third and possibly most likely option is that the pilot would stop in time and radio back to base whereupon some military guards would rush over in a Land Rover, arrest me and put me in the police cells before deporting me as a madman. The fourth option is similar to the third, except that the pilot turns the plane around halfway down the runway, lowers the back gate of the aircraft and lets me board, as if this is a normal occurrence.

I was nearly at the south end of the runway when the plane reached the far north end, its engines revving up and buzzing like a swarm of angry bees. It started to take off. I was still running, almost there, then I stopped, waving my arms above my head in what I

believed to be a last futile gesture. By now, dear reader, you will have discounted option 2. Discount options 1 and 3 as well. As I sat on the aircraft on the way to Seeb, I couldn't stop grinning. Even when I arrived and discovered that the military base was about three kilometres from the passenger terminal and there were no taxis. I exited the base, passed the armed guards and sauntered along the road with my suitcase in the burning mid-day heat. There were still another three hours to go before I needed to check-in.

* *

On my return from leave, I naturally enquired as to how things were going at Bukha. A new foreman had arrived, and he was to go on the next trip of the landing craft, saving me from resuming my less than happy time there. Apparently, Eric the fitter had arrived with the replacement tyre shortly after my departure and had fitted it, the wrong way round, causing the valve to be crushed. So, no further screening work was possible, and Eric returned by landing craft with the two damaged tyres, being sacked on the spot when reaching Ruwi and taking the next flight home. I was grateful that I did not have to return and was now based again at Ruwi, with a roving remit to check on the sites and ensure they received the necessary equipment and materials.

As the construction works for each power station were completed, the Hawker Siddeley team were advised, enabling them to commence their electrical works. The fuel tanks, which were part of their contract, were often constructed by them at the tail end of our construction works and they had a foreman who travelled from site to site to supervise the tank construction. One of the sites I had to visit, and which was almost complete was at Birkat-al-mawz. Birkat, along with the town of Bahla, both lay in the foothills of Jebel Akhdar, the highest part of the Al Hajar range which was virtually inaccessible. The name "Jebel Akhdar" translates as Green Mountain, this limestone range reaching a height of 3000m and therefore subject to a

considerable rainfall whereas the lower reaches are desert.[15] It was in the mid 1950's that the imam of these areas started a rebellion which was quashed by the RAF and special British forces who drove the rebels into the mountains. Both Bahla and Birkat suffered considerable damage to buildings which had already been neglected, no subsequent attempt being made to restore the ruined mud brick and stone buildings and town walls.[16]

Hearing over the radio that the site at Birkat had been hit by a tornado, I went to inspect the damage and check that all was well. Some months previously, when I had been setting out the site there, a passing nomad had approached me on his camel, offering me some dates. The rule of the desert is to share food and water, and I was reminded about this on more than one occasion. On one of my earlier trips along the Batinah coast, I was about to leave for Ruwi at the end of another hot day when an Omani approached me from seemingly nowhere, having walked for perhaps hours through the gravel desert. It was quite obvious to me what he wanted when he said the word "maiya". I only had a little water left in my Coleman flask and always liked to keep a little in case of breakdown on the way home, but I knew I had to give my supply to this thirsty man. I poured the iced water into the lid and passed it to him, watching his eyes light up as he drank. He beamed at me, indicating that the cold water was a surprise and tasted like nectar of the gods. He then continued his journey, making his way into the scrub to his distant destination.

On arrival at Birkat, there was little sign of any great damage – the tornado had missed the main power station building, passing over a corner of the site where the Hawker Siddeley tank foreman was working. He had been picked up from his workplace where he was welding pieces of steel together to create the fuel tanks, lifted over the perimeter wall and dropped on the other side, about fifty metres

[15] That is about the same height as Zugspitze, Germany's highest mountain with three glaciers or Glacier Peak in New Zealand's Southern Alps.

[16] It was only in the 1980's that the historical significance was recognised, some buildings now having been granted world heritage status and undergoing restoration to their former glory.

distant. He was still traumatised but had fortunately only received minor grazes and bruises, being extremely fortunate not to have been killed and under no illusion that he had survived an event which is usually fatal, unless one is protected by a bathtub or mattress. Whilst tornadoes were not a common hazard, dust devils were frequently encountered, particularly in places where the desert is close to mountain ranges. These spiralling currents would typically be between one and ten metres in diameter picking up the dust to a height of several metres before disappearing as suddenly as they appeared. One such event occurred when I was unpacking boxes of supplies at Izki. The vortex with a diameter of just under ten metres appeared out of the blue and picked up the empty boxes, arranging them in a circle around me. The six or seven boxes then proceeded to dance, rising about half a metre above the ground, moving two paces in an anticlockwise direction and settling down again before repeating the process. It was surreal and both a Pakistani who was my companion and I burst into giggles.

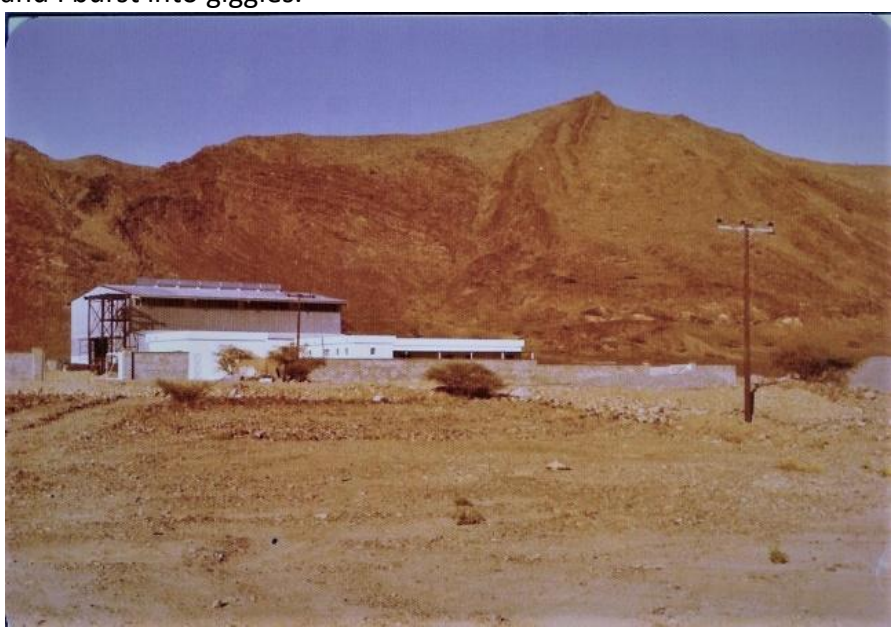

Figure 29 Birkat-al-mawz power station

Another site which I needed to check was that at the very remote outpost of Adam. The expat foreman, Mike, had completed the building works but Hawker Siddeley, for reasons best known to themselves, had decided that this would be one of the later ones on their list. The power station had been left for nearly nine months since being completed, waiting for the electrical installations and I wondered how I would find the building after all this time. There was a good chance that the air-conditioning units would have been removed from the accommodation block and electrical wiring stripped. I arrived with a translator to find that everything appeared to be in order. An Omani then approached me and asked for his wages – he was the watchman and had had guarded the power station for the last nine months without seeing anyone from Tarmac. No one had dismissed him, so he assumed that he was still the watchman; I assured him through the translator that we would send out a Land Rover with his outstanding pay as soon as I returned to Ruwi. My translator had relations in Adam, so we went to the town where he introduced me to a man who was obviously poor, living in a small house with few possessions. The translator told me proudly that this man used to be the wealthiest man in the town. I wondered what disaster had befallen him. No disaster, just that being rich meant that he had to share his wealth with his fellow citizens. Now he was poor but very highly regarded.

Figure 30 The fort at Nizwa

Back at Ruwi, I continued to ensure that supplies were dispatched to the sites, sometimes working in the yard to locate material such as formwork for concrete. On one such occasion, I looked up to see a Mercedes flatbed truck arrive. It had come from a distant site and in the back of the truck, unprotected from the heat and suffering the rough suspension, were about thirty workers. The dust covered occupants started to jump down, one of them noticing my presence at the back of the yard at a point where the rock face rose from the valley. He changed direction and walked towards me; the others followed in a large group. Thirty or so men, tired and shaken by the journey were converging on me. Some of their faces seemed familiar – they had worked at the site at Saham. They continued their ominous approach, and I looked for a means of escape, but my back was to the wall of rock behind me. Was this payback time, I wondered – did they resent the way I had managed them at Saham, making them work that night when the concrete mixer was repaired? The first man was by now within a single pace; he stopped and held out his hand. Caught by surprise, I shook it, this being repeated with the hands of all the others who followed. It was a humbling experience to see that these men respected the way I had treated them, despite my midnight concreting episode!

But after two years, it was time to leave. I had recently seen the tail end of monsoon rains arrive for a two-week period in winter, transforming the desert into a green carpet with insects and frogs, the wadis running full. Seeds must have lain dormant in the sand for months and even years, waiting for such an event. I had witnessed a country which was going through a profound change; in just a few years it had transformed from a backward feudal society controlled by imams and tribal leaders to a unified governed nation. The civil war had finally ended, enabling, in due course, tourism to become the economic driver, replacing the dwindling oil revenues. Paved asphalt roads were being constructed to areas which were previously almost inaccessible: change was happening at a frightening speed as communities received clinics, schools, electricity, sanitation, telephones and television. The first of many luxury hotels, the

Intercontinental, was being constructed on a beach at Qurum, not far from Muttrah.

In a few more years, nomads were to ditch their camels in favour of air-conditioned Japanese four-wheel drive vehicles. I felt privileged to have seen this unique transformation in a remote, and at that time largely unknown, country with such hospitable people. But after almost two years, I was ready to return home and await my next adventure, packing my bags in February 1977 for the Gulf Air flight to London at almost the same time as H.M. Queen Elizabeth II returned from her first visit to Muscat.

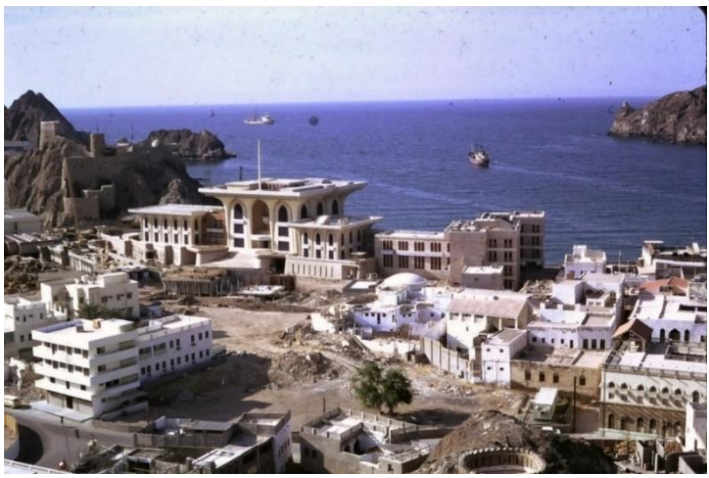

Figure 31 Old Muscat, the Sultan's palace under construction with Ft Al-Merani on left

Figure 32 Old Muscat looking inland. The town itself is tiny – it is the smallest capital city in the world.

5. The road to Aqaba

Your inadvertent teachings of perseverance and valour
Shows of inner strength in a very 'English manner'
Pure grit and determination backing up your ideals
As you ride out to liberate
Aqaba will be free!

"Aqaba (a matter of going)" from the album "Nothing is Written" by Galahad

I arrived home to an England which was depressingly familiar. Industrial relations had not improved, multiple IRA bombs had been found in the West End of London, inflation was at 16% and the economy was in the doldrums. However, some things had changed; anarchy had become popular among the young disillusioned working-class youth, resulting in "punks" and their music, punk rock, whereas at the other end of the spectrum, monarchists were preparing to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Tarmac's overseas offices had been relocated to Chiltern Street near Madame Tussauds waxworks museum and finding accommodation within a reasonable travelling time was my priority. I settled on a bedsit in South Hampstead, not far from Kilburn High Street, Hampstead being a well-to-do residential area whereas Kilburn and neighbouring Cricklewood were traditionally Irish but were now becoming increasingly inhabited by newer Commonwealth immigrants. To go to work, I could take the red Routemaster 159 service bus which ran from West Hampstead to Streatham, using the section down Abbey Road, past the music studios and the pedestrian crossing made famous by The Beatles on their cover for their Abbey Road album. As the Silver Jubilee approached in June, the double-decker buses changed in colour from red to silver in recognition of the event, which provided a reason to celebrate in an otherwise dreary year. However, a trip to New Zealand to visit my brother Chris, in Auckland, and my aunt and her family in Christchurch, was the high point of 1977 for me.

Working in the tender department for overseas projects, I was waiting to be posted to an overseas contract, so it was a little unsettling as I knew that my stay in London would be short-lived but without any specific timeframe. The projects which I was involved with were interesting enough – a tunnel under Sharjah Creek, a massive city expansion at Jubail, Saudi Arabia and most challenging of all, a road which was called "The Abha Descent" situated in a mountainous area of Saudi Arabia near the border with Yemen. I looked at the logistics of constructing this road which had an average gradient of 1 in 9 and was a series of tunnels, bridges, embankments and rock anchored cuttings. It looked almost impossible to construct without the use of helicopters and everyone in the tender team was relieved when our bid was unsuccessful.[17] Most of the guys I worked with had overseas experience and were a pleasant bunch with one notable exception. Charles, the estimator who was in his early sixties, was intent on earning the accolade as the rudest man in Britain. Perhaps he was fed up and wanted early retirement, or perhaps he had lived an unfulfilled life. Maybe it was his upbringing or his genes. I never found out – it would be rude to ask him about his behaviour, wouldn't it? In a separate room in the Tarmac offices, a team was working on another project, the expansion of the port in Aqaba, Jordan. It was my goal to join this team when an opportunity presented itself as the project looked interesting and more importantly, seemed likely to proceed.

As the months passed, the country celebrated the Silver Jubilee but other than this, there seemed little to look forward to. There were overseas events which made a distraction: New York City had a blackout caused by lightning strikes, Mrs Thatcher, then leader of the opposition, found herself locked in a toilet in Houston and the Red Army Faction terrorists were active in Germany. Apple and Commodore computers were becoming popular, and it was possible to play very simple games such as PONG, a version of table tennis, on

[17] Looking at a video of the Abha to Khamis Mushait road on YouTube, it is possible to understand the engineering challenges of constructing this road and the dangers the Saudi drivers pose when using it.

a black and white screen. On the darker side, the Yorkshire Ripper was on the loose and had not been identified, undertakers went on strike in London leaving 800 bodies unburied and the firemen went on strike, forcing ill-prepared troops to man 1950's mothballed trucks called Green Goddesses which were plainly not up to the job of extinguishing large fires. Perhaps Britain hosting the Eurovision song contest was enough reason for seven out of every ten people over 40 to say in an Opinium survey, that Britain was a better place to live in 1977 than in 2012. As the American columnist, actor and one-time cowboy Will Rogers remarked, "We are always yapping about the 'Good Old Days' and how we look back and enjoy it, but I tell you there is a lot of hooey to it. There is a whole lot of all our past lives that wasn't so hot."

September arrived, and I was finally recruited into the team working on the Aqaba port expansion in Jordan, being assigned to the building works. Two months later, I could bid goodbye to London and board a Royal Jordanian Airlines flight to Amman with a connecting flight to Aqaba. My next adventure was about to begin.

* *

Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq in a coup in 1968 although his position as head of state was not formalised until 1979. He had great ambitions for Iraq, not only in terms of development of the economy but also in becoming the major power in the Middle East. Other states on each side, Syria and Iran had similar aspirations and his relationship with them varied from that of being difficult to actively hostile. To the north of Iraq lived the Kurds who were aiming to form an autonomous region, making any trade route to Turkey dangerous. Iraq's imports by road could be cut off at any time by the Kurds, Iran or Syria and the Iraqi port of Basra was situated at the mouth of the disputed Shatt al Arab waterway located on the deltas of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, next to the Iranian border. Saddam needed an alternative safe route for imports and using the Jordanian port of Aqaba was the only realistic option. Iraq had a border dispute with Kuwait which ruled out any route through that country and in any case, the Arabian Gulf could be closed to shipping by Iran with mines. The

arrangement with Iraq suited Jordan as Iraq agreed to invest in expanded port facilities in Aqaba, along with an improved road link through Jordan to Iraq. In 1976, Jordan created a free trade zone in Aqaba, and with Iraqi money, prepared to develop the port and turn Aqaba into a tourist destination.

Figure 33 Map of Jordan (copyright Lonely Planet)

When I and the other expats first arrived at the end of 1977, Aqaba was a sleepy little town of about 25,000 inhabitants which was awakening from its slumbers. New local roads had been built ready for future development and some entrepreneurs were building a few speculative apartment blocks. King Hussein had long used Aqaba as a retreat, having a small palace, or more correctly a large villa, near the Israeli border. Aqaba had limited tourist facilities with only the one decent hotel, the Coral Beach, with its neighbouring water-skiing and diving centres. Just before reaching the port breakwater, one would pass the Palm Beach Hotel, which as the name suggests had a small palm fringed beach whilst the hotel itself was very primitive and used by backpackers on a budget. The Saudi border lay about 25 km along

the Gulf of Aqaba in the opposite direction to Eilat in Israel and on the other side of the Gulf, Taba in Egypt could be seen in the distance. A narrow-gauge railway ran from the phosphate mines near Ma'an to the port of Aqaba, winding its way down the steep mountain to the port. The railway engines would sound their mournful hooters as they descended the long incline, warning the Palestinian refugees in the camp on the outskirts of Aqaba to get out of the way, any attempt to stop with a long and heavy cargo of potash being out of the question. The port had two berths for loading the potash and some floating berths for containers and bulk cement. Most of the visiting ships with general cargo anchored in the bay and used lighters to offload goods.

Tarmac had partnered with local contractor, Shahin, in a joint venture to build four new berths and the associated cargo facilities such as warehouses, Tarmac undertaking most of the construction work and Shahin assisting with political issues and the employment of local subcontractors. There were four sections of work: the tubular piles for the new berths, the berth deck construction, the earthworks and the building works. I was employed on the section for the building works which consisted of the workers' camp, port staff houses, the new port building works and lastly but perhaps most importantly in the eyes of the expats, the recreational club. The port building works consisted of warehouses, a cold store, paved and lit laydown areas, security works such as fencing and weighbridges and a short section of railway track, the works including all the drainage and floodlighting. In my section, I was the only Tarmac site engineer, although a senior engineer arrived later; Shahin also supplied an engineer, a Palestinian who plainly resented being displaced from the land he regarded as his rightful home, adopting a hostile attitude to all non-Palestinians. Initially, I spent most of the time outside which was fine in the winter months when I first arrived but was almost unbearable in the heat of the summer, whereas the senior engineer would spend most of his time in the site offices.

A new shopping centre for small shops, with apartments above, called the Al Shwekini Centre, had just been completed and this was to be the accommodation for us expats on bachelor contracts

during our stay. Higher up the hill, three compartment blocks were under construction and two of these were to become the accommodation for those expats on married contracts. These permanent facilities were very luxurious compared to my experiences in Oman and I looked forward to a more civilized life. The site offices were about five minutes' drive away, in a connected series of prefabricated units and as I did not have a pickup to myself, I arranged to get a lift along with several others every morning and evening, often sitting in the back of the pickup, oblivious to any safety issues which would prevent such means of transport today. In the Shwekini building, we each had our own room, with a shared toilet and shower between every two rooms. As for facilities, an area was allocated as a dining room and kitchen, and one of the bedrooms was converted for use as the bar. Breakfast and evening meals were provided, the canteen staff consisting of two waiters and a cook who were Egyptian, and a part time barman was recruited locally. The shops below our bedrooms included an upmarket hairdresser where I was to have the best haircut I have ever had in my life! New offices nearby had been taken over by freight forwarding agencies dealing with the imports from the port, or in one case by a "fright forwarder".

Before tackling the real work, I had to get to grips with my first project which was the construction of the labour camp for the Sri Lankan workers who were being recruited to construct the port. A local contractor was given the contract to supply the workforce and building materials to construct the labour camp, this being a vast improvement on the tented areas occupied by those from the Indian sub-continent and employed by local contractors. An outline design had been prepared by a local architect and my role was to act as the client's representative, clerk of works and site engineer. Without my own transport or a site office, I was dropped off on the barren hillside above the port where I could sit and gaze at the port below and watch the earthworks which were just commencing for the port expansion. Fortunately, it was early spring, the weather being pleasant, so working outside all day was no hardship. The owner of the construction company building the accommodation blocks would visit

once every two or three days and we would sit together and chat for perhaps half an hour on those occasions. One of the decisions I had to make involved the design of the “facilities”. The architect’s design only included the basic block structure, so I had to detail everything else including the toilets which were provided with Asian style squat toilets with hoses. Once the site clearance and earthworks had progressed sufficiently, work could commence on the warehouses when the labour arrived, and the labour camp was duly completed before the arrival of the third world labour. I do not know why labour from Sri Lanka was chosen – the Sri Lankan people are, as a generalisation, short in stature and not particularly muscular and it was probably more to do with the labour agent we dealt with than any other factor which influenced this decision.

Our labour manager was a no-nonsense character, a Scandinavian called Rags. He summoned me shortly after the arrival of the labour to tell me that the toilets were blocked, and it was all my fault. The Sri Lankans were used to pedestal toilets, not squat toilets I was told. Even now, I am not sure that this was correct, the blockages probably being caused by the lack of a flush cistern, but my name was mud, or more accurately, shit. I believe the solution was to provide buckets for flushing! The arrival of the workforce meant that I needed to get on and set out the foundations for the warehouses and I was to find that I would be reunited with Ken, the foreman who I had worked with at Southampton and Portsmouth. The first shipment of steelwork arrived; we were nearly ready to start the erection of the steel frames.

The steelwork was provided by a British company called Conder Structures and it was their responsibility to provide a steel erecting foreman. A man, whose name I forget and was in his late fifties duly arrived but seemed less than enthusiastic to get to grips with the task in hand. In recent years, he had been office based and was showing some reluctance to take up site duties again. His first task was to select a crew of steel erectors from the pool of labour. One workman stood out as being knowledgeable and he was selected as the chargehand. It was difficult to select the others – there were those who claimed to have some steel erecting experience, but they didn’t

appear to be very clued up. The first batch of steelwork had been offloaded at the port a hundred yards away and had now cleared customs – in addition to the pieces of steel were sacks of bolts and a large number of cans of paint. The materials were checked, enabling a start to be made erecting the columns which sat on rocker plates, these no doubt being necessary to cope with any earthquakes, the Red Sea and Gulf being a northern extension of the seismically active Great Rift Valley in Africa. Steel wedges were used to try to make the leaning columns plumb so that the rafters could be fitted a little later. It was at this point that the expat foreman decided that he had had enough. Unused to dealing with relatively unskilled labour who needed a considerable amount of guidance, the foreman became increasing concerned and nervous before calling it a day, disappearing on the next flight home before the first rafter had been erected. I was now on my own, just as the real work was about to begin.

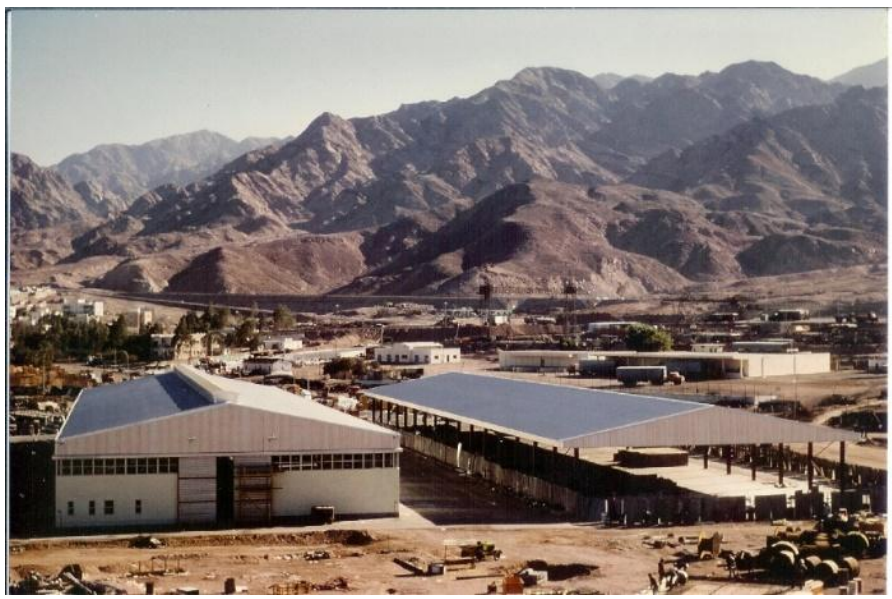

Figure 34 Transit sheds at Aqaba

I learned a great deal in the next two weeks – about mixing, applying and testing the thickness of layers of paint, the repercussions if exactly the right length bolts were not used where specified and the

need to fix cleats and brackets on the ground simplifying the work at a later stage. Having arranged for a gable end to be bolted together I then realised that this could not be erected in one piece as had been my intention and it had to be dismantled. My main concern was to avoid an accident and in this I was successful, but I was desperate for a replacement foreman to arrive and was relieved when John, in his early thirties, showed up. John took charge immediately and the steel frame quickly progressed, as I had already sorted the pieces, bolts and paint in order that they could be easily located. John was opinionated and had set out his conditions before his arrival. He would stay for three months and no longer and was not going to let any "office" staff tell him what to do. He viewed anyone who did not work out on site as a "waste of space" and I spent much of my time outside to ensure I did not get tarred with that brush.

The work continued until the point when the roofing and side cladding needed to commence. The Sri Lankan labour had by now been allocated to specific tasks elsewhere in the port construction and there was no one left to undertake the roofing and cladding work. John and I had to persuade other work sites at the port to release a few men to start the roofing, but we still had a shortage, so we had to recruit local labour and John found an Egyptian chargehand to supervise the work. The most complicated building, the cold store, was about to commence. This had insulated foundations connected with tie rods and pieces of steelwork dangling from the rafters which had to be suspended in mid-air, eventually sitting on the insulated cold store panel walls.

Following John's departure, it was now my task to be not only the site engineer but also the foreman to build the cold store, to undertake the cladding and roofing works and to construct the covered lay down areas and weighbridges. The cold store construction of insulated panels within the building was undertaken by a specialist contractor from the UK and, in due course, the specialist workers arrived – I forget whether it was two or three men, but I do recall that at least one of them had previously performed with the pop group, "The Tremeloes". Their work involved trying to get the suspended

steelwork to rest on top of the insulated panels once the panels had been erected, a difficult task not made any easier by the fact that I was unable to position the swinging steel brackets sufficiently accurately in the first place. One of them came into the bar one day with a gash in his head caused by trying to manoeuvre the swinging suspended steelwork into position. “See what you have done!” he shouted at me, but I had no response, knowing that “Silence is Golden”.

As some of the steel erectors had now been assigned to cladding duties, I was short of workmen and made it known locally that I was looking for new recruits. By now, the summer heat had given way to cooler winter conditions, and it could be quite chilly early in the morning, causing the steelwork to be wet and slippery with dew. On this occasion, I was told by the Egyptian cladding chargehand that a man had approached him who appeared to be looking for work. The man, a Jordanian Hashemite, had the appearance of a tribesman who lived in the mountains which lay behind the port. I thought he might have misunderstood the nature of the work involved, but as he spoke no English, I pointed at the portal frame in front of me to indicate that it was necessary to work at height. To my amazement and then horror, he interpreted this as an instruction to shin up the slippery column, walk without any safety harness across the dew-covered rafter and slide down the column the other side. My heart was in my mouth as he did this whist the other steel-erectors stopped work and looked on in surprise and admiration. He was employed on the spot and from then on was assigned the most dangerous and difficult tasks by the Sri Lankan steel erecting chargehand.

The expats were a varied bunch, some larger than life and a few resembling the frightening mob who terrorised the local populace, as detailed in Terry Coleman’s classic book about the men who built Britain’s railways, “The Railway Navvies”. These were the Glaswegians who had just finished constructing the Thames Barrier substructure and were now working on the piling rig which drove the massive tubular steel piles which supported the shipping berth decks. To keep these men under control, Tarmac appointed a project manager, David, in his late thirties who could stand up to them both in physical stature

and behaviour; a man who had had been given the nickname “The Animal” on the Thames Barrier project. However, for the most part, the expats were friendly bunch of young engineers, a storekeeper, foremen and clerical staff as well as the more senior engineers, commercial staff, a male nurse and production and project managers. Those on bachelor status tended to be the young engineers, a number of the more junior clerical staff and the technical managers such as those for the quarry and concrete batching plant. The piling crew and weld testing engineers also lived in the Shwekini building. The married staff, who largely comprised senior engineers, admin and procurement staff, supervisors and managers, lived “up the hill” in one of the two apartment blocks or in the case of the most senior managers, in detached houses. As the expats on married status started to move in, a school with a swimming pool and film viewing area was opened next to the apartments and a couple were employed as schoolteachers for the expat children of primary school age.

After work, the main focus of interest in the Shwekini Building was, as might be imagined, the bar. This bar was initially run by the Glaswegian piling crew whose task it was to account for the takings, man the bar when the barman was not present and ensure that there was adequate stock. After a few months, things started to go awry – the takings did not add up correctly and supplies started to run out. I happened to be in the bar when the recriminations began, the piling crew arguing amongst themselves. At the point when the discussions became most heated, one of the crew turned around and seeing me sitting at the bar said, “Why don’t you run the bar?” That was about as polite an invitation as could be expected and if the answer was “no thank you” there had better be a very good reason. I thus became the bar manager for the next three months, knowing that there was a danger of being lynched if the bar had run out of beer for the piling crew or vodka for office-based James who was an alcoholic.

As I also had to cover as a barman, I spent much of my evening spare time in the bar during this period and was tempted to try some of the more exotic offerings including the Greek aperitif ouzo, in quantities greater than was good for me. On a couple of occasions, I

arrived on site the following day feeling distinctly queasy and unable to perform properly. I looked for somewhere to hide until I felt better but there was nowhere suitable. As I shambled out of the office to the site, I passed the concrete batching plant which had a tall yellow cement silo at one side. A vertical steel ladder was attached to the side of the silo, enabling the occasional inspection of the contents by means of a small hatch in the top. I looked around to make sure no one was looking and quickly climbed the ladder to the top, where, if I lay flat, I could not be observed. Half an hour later and feeling a little less unwell, I would descend and begin work, with no-one any the wiser.

The bar had some non-alcoholic diversions – a dart board and a half-size second-hand snooker table which had a slight defect which impacted in the trajectory of balls so that they did not run in a perfectly straight line along one side. One of the young engineers, Andy, who had excellent eye – hand co-ordination and was keen on sport arranged a sports tournament. He bought a trophy from a local shop and organised a competition which required eight pairs to play against each other at darts, dominoes and snooker in a knock-out tournament. Andy paired himself with another talented player, determined to win the trophy he had bought for the competition. Other staff paired themselves until there were just two people left – those considered to be without talent at such sport. Those two were Dave, the Scottish quarry manager and me. Andy produced the draw, ensuring that he stood a good chance of getting to the final. A further draw was made to determine the order of playing the sports, it being unnecessary to play the third sport if any pairing won the first two.

Despite not having played dominoes since I was a boy in short trousers, I seemed to have a natural talent, and we won all those matches. Dave was steady at darts, and we had a few lucky wins. We somehow avoided playing snooker until, much to everyone's surprise, we made it to the final, playing against Andy and his partner. Andy licked his lips and smiled – this was his dream draw. First there was dominoes which was a close contest which we finally won. We were given short shrift at darts being comprehensively thrashed and things

were going the same way at snooker. It got to the stage that the brown, blue, pink and black balls were left on the table and Dave, and I needed to pot the lot if we were to win. Andy was already looking admiringly at the trophy as Dave lined up to pot the brown, successfully as it turned out. He could not pot the blue and it fell to Andy who also missed. It was my turn, and I had been left a relatively simple shot (for a competent player) into the centre pocket. I succeeded but now faced the pink which was almost touching the cushion on the bottom left corner. It needed a fine glancing blow, and I produced, what for me was, an outstanding shot, potting the pink ball in the far pocket. The cue-ball had ended up quite close to the baulk cushion and the black was almost touching the cushion at the far end. With the balls deviating slightly from a straight line when rolling slowly, I knew that I was in danger of missing completely with a soft shot and could not afford to give away any penalty points. I crashed the cue-ball into the black ball, hoping that I did not leave it in a position for the next player to pot. Being a half size table, the black ball raced back to the baulk end before rapidly returning to the far end where, with a final bounce off the cushion, it slowly ambled back. At this point, the imperfection in the table took over and the ball rolled lazily in an arc and plopped into the top right-hand corner pocket. There was a pregnant pause and gasps before the onlookers cheered and Andy's jaw dropped open. He presented Dave and me with the trophy, sporting the sourest face imaginable. There were no more tournaments after that.

Besides the bar, we needed other diversions. There was sailing with its many adventures, which I will return to later, and a small group of us indulged in middle-distance running. The outskirts of Aqaba had roads which had been newly constructed but which, as yet, had no buildings to serve, making them traffic free and ideal for a run after work, so keeping those who undertook this exercise fit. Dusk would be approaching as we completed the run and from time to time, we would be greeted with a magnificent sunset over the bay, the blue sky turning orange and then a deep crimson. Another diversion was a visit to the somewhat seedy Palm Beach Hotel which was conveniently

situated on the road on the way back from the site. It was an ideal watering hole, with a covered alfresco area and a small sandy beach, although swimming was not advisable without canvas shoes because of spiny sea urchins and razor-sharp coral reefs in the shallow water. The occasional bus full of Aussie pack-backers would stay the night at the hotel, as well as Lebanese students on vacation. One group of such students were a delightful bunch who sang, while one of their number played a guitar. They seemed so friendly and carefree, yet Beirut was being torn apart in a civil war. Perhaps they needed to forget about such dreadful things. A disco was held once a week at the hotel and that was an opportunity for both those on bachelor and married contracts to mix. At first, there were few wives, and no bachelor ladies so dancing partners were in short supply. One of the early wives to arrive was Glenda, wife of Norman the storeman. Norman was a quiet introvert who didn't like to dance and was controlled by Glenda, an extrovert party girl. Glenda would be on her feet all evening, dancing with us lads, with much enjoyment for all concerned.

However, for wives without work and children, overseas life can be miserable and boring if they do not enjoy gossip and sunbathing. Of course, all married life has its ups and downs and living in a small community, any disagreements, infidelity or deviant habits would inevitably become public knowledge. I learnt about any such gossip from a married Australian buyer called Ray, who I met when we started sailing and again when I was given the task of designing and building the club for the married contract community. The facilities included a clubhouse large enough to accommodate a full-size snooker table, a swimming pool and a half sunken squash court, and Ray sourced the materials which were required to construct the club. Ray ordered the terrazzo floor tiles from a local factory, and I went with him to inspect them. I designed the layout for the clubhouse, pool and squash court, whilst Tony, the chief engineer for the port project, detailed the reinforcing for the concrete roof. I supervised the construction and was pleased to learn that the club was deemed a success by those expats who used it.

Ray's wife, Debbie, had a first-class degree from a top London university (I think it was in microbiology) and had managed to get a job at the recently completed Aqaba General Hospital, near the Shwekini Building. After hours, she would meet some of the other wives and hear the gossip. Ray and Debbie invited me to have dinner with them from time to time and I therefore heard the goings on among the married community. There were the normal domestic incidents of course – the Welsh ex-boxer who had an argument with his wife and fortunately took out his frustrations on the furniture rather than her, reducing it to matchwood. My friend Ken came from a mining village in County Durham, a region where domestic violence was quite common and at that time accepted by many in that former coal mining region as normal. His wife would sport a black eye every so often but seemed resigned to this treatment and did not complain to the other wives. The land surveyor for the project was a young Scottish guy called John in his early twenties, who had been married for about a year. He adopted the position that if his wife loved him, she would stay faithful to him, and he really didn't need to make any special effort to show his affection to her. This was not a very wise attitude to adopt and one of the commercial staff, a young handsome and very eligible bachelor called Stuart, fancied John's attractive young wife. It was somewhat embarrassing for everyone when Stuart and John's wife would walk in holding hands and sit down on the front row of seats when a film was being shown after hours in the school grounds. John would follow shortly afterwards and sit in the row behind them.

The schoolteachers were a husband-and-wife team. The husband had been in the RAF and was given the nickname "Biggles". They were generally well regarded by the parents of the primary school children and kept good discipline. There was never, to my knowledge, any suggestion of any impropriety regarding the behaviour of Biggles and his wife, so I was somewhat surprised that Ray told me that he noticed empty crates of gin bottles on a regular basis outside their apartment, which would be visited by young Arab boys at about ten o'clock at night. It seems that they may have been Jekyll and Hyde characters.

One of the wives without children, who I will call Claire, was married to a New Zealander, Tom, who was an office manager. He was, to put it bluntly, a rather boring person who seemed to have few interests outside work. Claire used to come with Ray, Debbie and me when we went on our five or six excursions to Petra, the "Rose City" carved out of the rock. At that time, there were not the vast hordes of tourists found today and we would each rent a horse and sit on the saddle while we were led by the groom into the city. There, we would dismount and explore the extensive caves and rock sculptures, clambering onto the rose-red rocky hills overlooking the city. It was known that Claire used to come with us and as I was observed visiting Ray's apartment from time to time, it was mentioned that I must be having an affair with Claire who lived in the neighbouring block. I kept quiet when this was put to me, not wishing to encourage any gossip, knowing that she was having an affair, not with me but with a German diving instructor.

A truly remarkable place we visited was Wadi Rum, made famous by Lawrence of Arabia and consisting of a broad valley cut into the sandstone and granite rock, its spectacular landscape being featured as a backdrop to a dozen films. When we visited, there were no other tourists, just the nomads in their goat-hair tents to keep us company. We explored the area covered by sand dunes towards the end of the valley, the absence of any noise living up to the term "deafening silence". I could hear my heart beating, every breath sounded like a steam train and every step in the sand made a noise as if I was using a shovel: I found the experience quite disconcerting. The wadi was approached off the King's Highway, which led towards Amman and Petra, the road offering superb vistas at various locations where we would sometimes stop to admire the view.

On one occasion, a Jordanian goat herder approached us and indicated that he wanted to show us something. We had a Land Rover, so we took him on board and leaving the road high up in the mountains followed over the bumpy scrubby terrain in the direction he was pointing. We came to a place where his tribe of goats were grazing, and it was then that we saw what he had wanted to show us – a well

situated in the most unlikely place on the mountainside – this was surely a miracle. There was another place where water flowed from a rock not too far distant - local tradition says the spring of Wadi Musa (Valley of Moses) at Petra is where Moses struck the rock and brought forth water (Numbers 20:10-11) and a freshwater spring still emerges from the rocks at the entrance of the modern town.

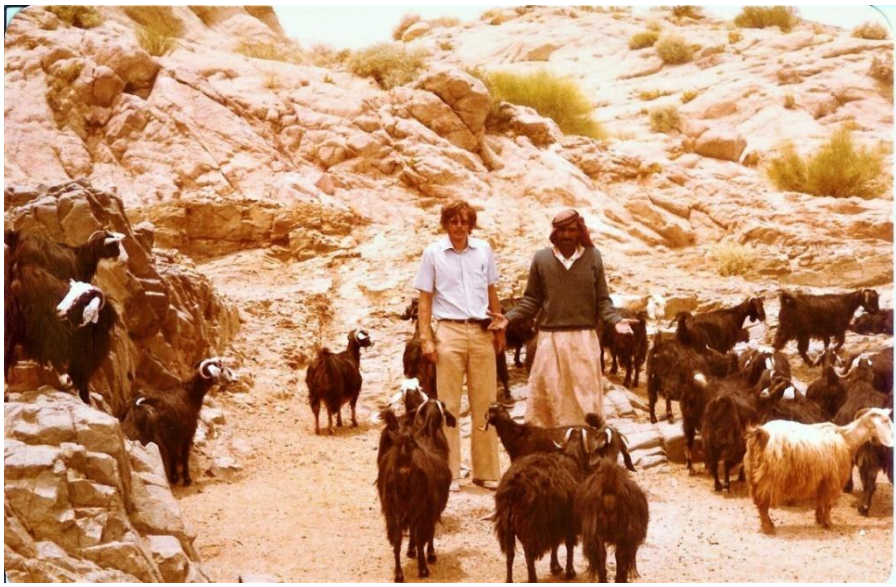

Figure 35 Author and goatherd at well

The other little project to which I was assigned was called the Employers Representative's housing. The Employer's Representative (ER) role used to be known as the "Resident Engineer" and he and his team came from a British engineering consultant. About a dozen houses were to be constructed on the hill overlooking the port, initially used to house the ER's team and some of the senior Tarmac-Shahin staff, later to be handed over for use by the port officials. The barren hillside needed to be terraced to enable the houses to be built, about four terraces being required. I walked the ground before setting up timber profiles which could be used to ensure that the terraces were flat and excavated to the correct level. I noticed some clusters of large stones and being somewhat sensitive to my earlier mistake in Oman, I made enquiries as to whether these might be two graves. My concerns

turned out to be well-founded; it seemed that they were indeed graves, almost certainly those of Turkish soldiers.

It is well known that Lawrence of Arabia blew up the Hejaz Railway from Damascus to Medina in about six or seven locations before catching the Turkish garrison in Aqaba by surprise on 6 July 1917. It was said that the Germans and Turks were “so paralyzed and bewildered by the unexpected achievement of the Arabs in getting across the mountains and through the passes that they surrendered without further ado”.[18] However, Lawrence had actually arrived a few weeks after the British Red Sea Patrol had attacked the Turks, which might have been why the Turks and Germans surrendered so readily. "On the 18th April, information was received that a European officer had arrived at Akaba with some camels carrying mines, and the Senior Naval Officer of the Red Sea Patrol immediately proceeded there with the "LAMA" and the "ESPIEGLE", and at daylight on the 20th April attacked the Turkish post with landing parties from the crews of the "NORTHBROOK", "ESPIEGLE" and "LAMA". A portion of the trenches were captured with one wounded and ten unwounded prisoners. The remainder of the enemy retreated to the hills leaving two dead behind them”.[19]

Perhaps these two graves were those of the Turks killed in the earlier British attack. I was given two small sacks by the hospital and told to put any remains in these. A large Caterpillar D8 dozer, as used on the port earthworks, was assigned to create the terraces. Having established the profiles, I needed to find a reliable banksman who could check the levels using a “T” shaped boning rod. A worker who could speak English was found and he seemed to be very intelligent, immediately understanding what was required. I asked him if he had a profession, and he told me that he had studied nuclear engineering at university but had been unable to find work in that field. The dozer started levelling the site creating vast clouds of dust which I tried to control by means of a water bowser although it seemed somewhat

[18] As noted by Lowell Thomas in his book “With Lawrence of Arabia”, chapter VIII.
[19] Letter of Proceedings No. 538/1139, page vii in the Red Sea section of Naval Commander in Chief, East Indies and Egypt (Vice Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss) dated 27th April 1917 (covering the period 9th April to 27th April).

ineffective. When I next checked that terrace, the levels were spot on, and no bones had been retrieved. Any human remains had no doubt been reinterred and I returned the empty bags. I wondered at the fate of the nuclear engineer who had performed such a great job, working in a cloud of dust. Many Middle Eastern students study engineering at university, some of them coming to Europe to study, only to find that worthwhile employment is not available in their own countries, with despotic leaders using their services to make armaments, explosive devices, poison gas and devise ever more ingenious ways to make car bombs and means to bring down aircraft. Until and unless these bright minds can be used productively, there will be unrest in the Middle East with waves rippling out beyond the local shores.

The houses were designed locally, being designed to local codes, on the assumption that Jordanian contractors would build them. Using high strength concrete and applying rigid quality control, these single storey houses must have been some of the most robust ever constructed and were given the nickname “gun emplacements” by one of the inspectors of the works. I left the supervision of the construction to a newly arrived foreman, Roy, who I had first met when working in Southampton. I visited occasionally to keep an eye on things, but as I had no transport of my own, I relied on getting a lift. Roy had a pickup, but had a gammy leg, so could not drive for any length of time. One day, he was assigned a newly recruited driver and being in the port area, suggested I go with him to the housing site. I squeezed into the front seat and sitting three abreast, we headed out of the port and across the dual carriageway road leading from Aqaba to the Saudi border. As we were crossing the dual carriageway road, the new driver stalled the pickup just as a fuel tanker was approaching down the long hill at a fast speed. Our driver nervously tried to restart the pickup but was unfamiliar with the vehicle and panicked, leaving it in gear. The tanker was bearing down on us, horn blaring and everything seemed to pass in slow motion, and I remember trying to open the door to get out, but my actions were also slowed down. The tanker was getting closer and closer, time seemed to freeze and just when it seemed inevitable that it would hit us, mashing us all into pulp,

it stopped a few metres away. We were saved because the tanker was empty – had it been only partially full, it could not have stopped in time.

Road accidents can claim more lives than construction related accidents. Only one worker was killed on site – his body was mysteriously found floating in the sea near the rig a day after he disappeared. No one witnessed him fall into the water and there was some speculation – was it murder, self-harm or an accident. We never knew, and the local police did not seem to be particularly interested. They did crack down on obvious cases of drink driving and one of our number, an assistant office manager nicknamed “the slug”, was caught and sent to the police cells for three days. I went with Ray to visit him and provide some snacks and a bit of cheer during his confinement in the shared caged cell. There was a more serious incident when the Scottish workshop manager was drunk while driving, knocking down and killing two Indian workmen who were walking at the side of the road. This would normally have involved a lengthy prison sentence in a Jordanian jail. Strings were pulled and the manager was deported one week later, while Tarmac paid reparations to the bereaved families. The families also wanted the remains of the deceased to be repatriated which was somewhat of a problem as there were no suitable embalming facilities in Aqaba to prepare the bodies for the flights back to India. The site ambulance was requisitioned to travel to Amman and was filled with ice, the bodies being laid on the ice which resulted in water dripping out of the ambulance doors in a steady trickle.

The assistant Employers Representative was an Egyptian called Rafat. I found him quite engaging, if a little exasperating at times, as he inevitably had to support the English inspector, who would go out of his way to find the hidden places where he could use his magnetic gauge to prove that the paint thickness was slightly less than specified. This would drive John, the steel erecting foreman, up the wall and did appear to be somewhat vindictive. Rafat had recently married, and his young wife was staying with a relative in Amman when we heard the terrible news – she had been killed in a car accident there. Rafat left to

arrange her funeral and returned to work three days later. He was naturally distraught, and the other expats steered clear, not knowing what to say. I decided that I would have to see him sooner or later and I might as well be the first one to visit. Often, bereaved people just need to talk to someone, and I sat and listened for twenty minutes when he told me what had happened and what he had been through. I was glad I made the visit when I did.

The dangers of road accidents did not diminish even when we went on leave. One young engineer, named Ian, was a promising footballer who was on the books of the Aston Villa youth team. On his first leave, he returned to his home near Wolverhampton at about the same time as Bill, the Hungarian ex-wrestler who was employed as the concreting plant manager. They met up and as they were driving along one of the winding country roads in the area one evening, Ian drove into a tree and was killed. It seemed such a waste of life for someone at the start of a promising future.

Upsetting the piling crew was something I had managed to avoid during my time as the bar manager. We all knew better than to do or say anything which might incur their wrath – that is us, the outsiders, but this did not necessarily apply to their own kind. One day, after work, the bachelors were eating their evening meal when a fight suddenly erupted. A massive and muscular crew member had fallen out with a smaller wiry colleague leaving us to watch helplessly as he beat the smaller man to within an inch of his life, knowing that anyone who intervened risked being badly injured or killed themselves. We were relieved when the man who was most badly injured was discharged from hospital two days later. David, the project manager, fired both protagonists and it was perhaps somewhat ironical that they found themselves on the same flight out of Aqaba to Amman.

One member of our team who was mostly invisible was our office manager in Amman. John was a shadowy figure who often seemed to be unavailable, being on “other business”. To some, it was a mystery as to why Tarmac continued to employ him. At times of crisis when there were dues or fines to be paid, materials to be expedited or visas obtained, he always seemed to come up with the goods and

so his other business was ignored. Ray speculated that John was an arms dealer and that was perfectly plausible given the volatile and war-like nature of the leaders and organisations in the Middle East and the massive flow of weapons into that arena. Whatever his other work was, it enabled him to have good and influential connections which were beneficial to the project.

Ray's connections with local traders enabled me to meet a few of the Jordanians with whom he had dealings. One man had a hook which replaced his right hand. Of course, people were likely to think it had been amputated for theft, a practice not normal in Jordan but not unknown in other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Somalia. The poor man was at pains to explain the reason for his deformity which was more down to greed than theft. He used to go fishing and had decided that it took rather a long time to catch fish and that this could be speeded up with a little "help". The help came in the form of explosives which he tossed into the water, killing and stunning fish which floated to the surface making easy pickings. One day, something went awry, the explosives blowing off his hand, so ending that particular line of employment. He was now a trader and must have grown tired of explaining his misfortune to curious minds.

Another Jordanian trader invited Ray and me to his house, where we were invited to a cup of tea. His wife joined us but remained veiled throughout, appearing to show no embarrassment in breast feeding her baby in front of us, acting as a reminder of the different customs and taboos within societies, that outwardly may appear similar. When I was invited with Ray and Debbie to a Hashemite feast in the desert, I knew that I might not enjoy the food, but it was an opportunity I could not resist. We arrived at the large goat-hair tent to find a half-cooked sheep carcass inside. The "meal" was obviously taking longer than anticipated to cook over the fire. Debbie had to sit with the women while the men sat close to the fire. After sitting for about an hour, our host decided that we couldn't wait any longer and started to pull the barely cooked sheep to pieces. Pieces of fatty glutinous meat, internal organs and bone were peeled with bare hands and divided onto plates. It was now the turn of the head which was

pulled apart. I noticed the two eyeballs being plucked out and something I learnt in primary school came to the fore: the honoured guest is given an eyeball. I prayed that we were not the honoured guests, but of course, we were. I could not face an eyeball and was extremely grateful to Ray who had the courage to eat both of them.

Notwithstanding these various events and diversions, it was the waters of the Gulf of Aqaba at the head of the Red Sea which made Aqaba such a special location and which shaped some of my adventures there.

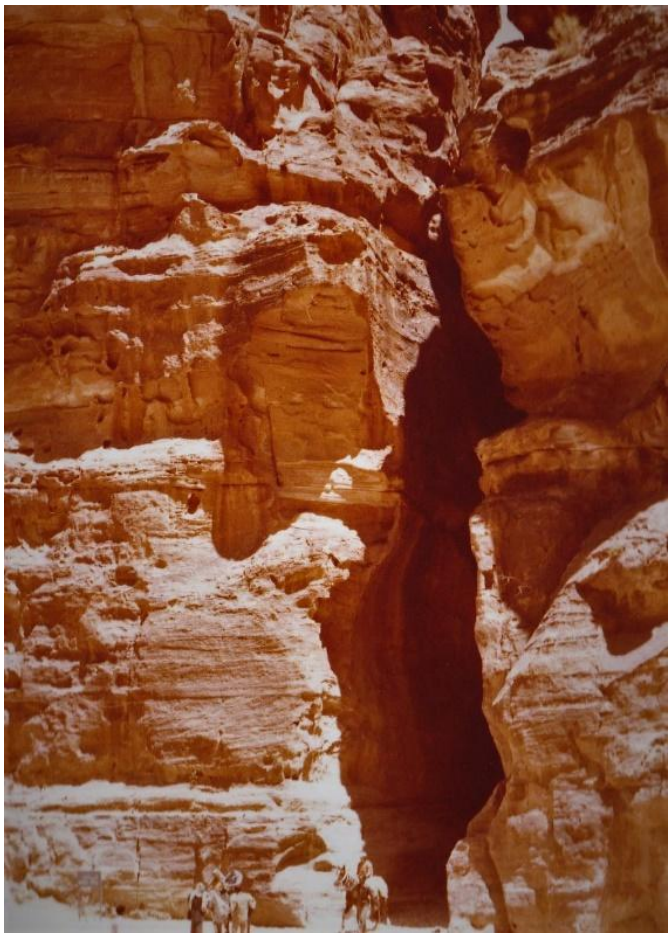

Figure 36 Leaving the siq (main entrance) at Petra, the rose red city, on horseback.

6. Hazardous seas

That far off ship,
Just crossed over the horizon,
Heading for an unknown shore,
Has left my sight once more,
A destination I will never see,
For this sea's laid claim to me,
My small dinghy fills,
from holes that ever leak,
Will soon take me deep, deep down,
For Poseidon's decreed that I should drown...

The fear of lungs filling up
with salty sea water,
Of taking my very last breath,
Is in some odd way quite comforting,
For I prefer the fate of death.

From poem "Adrift" by Tom Bell

When the port of Aqaba first opened in 1959, phosphates were one of the main exports. Jordan was not oil-rich like some of its neighbours and needed to develop what little natural resources it had, so production of phosphates was increased, a second phosphate berth being added in 1966, together with additional storage. Other exports and imports were managed by the means of lighters (barges) which served ships anchored in the bay and unloaded at floating berths. The phosphates came from two mines near the city of Ma'an which is located between Aqaba and Amman and an extension to the Turkish built Hejaz narrow gauge railway was opened between the mines and Aqaba port in 1975, to deliver the phosphates to the port. Phosphates are used in the production of fertilizers, detergents, pharmaceuticals, sulphuric acid and steel. The trains, of which there were three or four a day, transported these white powdery phosphates in about thirty or forty wagons, usually pulled by two engines. The descent to Aqaba is long, steep and curvaceous with a speed limit of about 30km per hour,

the railway line passing a Palestinian refugee camp situated astride the tracks just outside the port city, prompting each passing train to emit long wails on the hooter as a warning to the inhabitants.

One hot summer's day when I was working on one of the new warehouses, I noticed that the mournful wails of the hooter were more persistent than usual, causing me to look up from my work and to witness an astonishing sight. The driver had lost control of the train on the steep incline and was now approaching a speed of at least twice the allowable limit. Each wagon had a brake, these being fully applied, the result being what appeared to be a continuous sheet of flame which ran from the engine brake shoes right the way along the train to the last wagon. I watched awestruck as the train reached the final curve just before the berths, not far from the boundary for our works. The result was inevitable as the engines fell off the elevated track, bringing the wagons with them as they concertinaed into each other. I rushed to summon our works ambulance to find an unimpressed nurse James, who told me the ambulance was reserved for our construction purposes. He did relent and send the ambulance after a few minutes, but he was right – the Jordanian authorities immediately sealed off the area, letting no one (including our ambulance) inside. The two men in the front engine were either killed or badly injured and about fifteen wagons were severely damaged and possibly written off, many others needing some repairs. It was fortuitous that a ship had just arrived with another thirty new phosphate wagons which had presumably been ordered to increase the number of trains and not to anticipate such an incident as had just occurred!

The area of the Gulf outside the port was always quite full of ships at anchor waiting to offload supplies. Although some had containers and had to use the floating ro-ro berth, many used the ships' derricks to offload grain, cement reinforcing bars and other materials into lighters. There were often between five and ten ships at anchor, but it was certain other arrivals which attracted our attention. Large naval, grey-painted ships would appear from time to time – they were probably U.S. Navy auxiliary ships although we could not be sure. These had a protruding stern beam which allowed sealed floating grey

containers to be lowered to the sea, where they were towed to the port. There, the contents would be removed in the port, the empty containers being collected on a future visit. We never knew for certain what was inside these large sealed floating containers, but it was thought that these must contain armaments and military vehicles. The United States, along with many other countries, was more than willing to export arms to anyone who was not considered a threat at that time and the beneficiary in this case was probably Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces.

But it was not just the port facilities which were being developed, and the suburb of Aqaba nearest to the Israeli border was starting to realise its potential as a major tourist resort. King Hussein's summer "palace" was a large luxurious villa situated close to the Israeli border. Bordering this was an area used for swimming and water skiing, followed by the Coral Beach hotel which was the main tourist hotel. Then came facilities for diving for tourists to look at the beautiful and fascinating coral and marine life and a public beach, followed by the very basic Palm Beach Hotel which lay just before the start of the port breakwater. Having such facilities near a construction project was a novelty for many of us who tried out the water-skiing. One day after work, I was swimming near the water-skiing base, keeping to the area of sea marked out with floats as safe for swimming. On the other side of the beach, which was fenced off, was the King's palace. A skier suddenly emerged within a few yards of where I was swimming, swinging in a wide arc behind the speedboat which was pulling him. It was too close for comfort – I had nearly been decapitated by King Hussein.

King Hussein sometimes entertained guests at his royal villa and the royal household had at one time purchased three Widgeon class fibreglass dinghies in case any of the guests wanted to sail, the boats now having fallen into disrepair. Tarmac bought these at a knock-down price for use by the expats and the half a dozen of us who had some sailing experience set to work cannibalising one of them to provide two serviceable dinghies. The expat sailors organised a

number of sailing races, using the anchored ships as the course. Unfortunately, one of the boats had a slight leak which penetrated the built-in buoyancy with the result that after about half an hour at sea, the dinghy would be noticeably lower in the water and therefore slower, handicapping whoever sailed in that boat. The novelty of sailing wore off for most of those early enthusiasts after a few months, leaving the boats for the almost exclusive use of Ray and myself. If we had relatively little time after work, Ray and I would usually share one dinghy, as it took a fair time to get a boat ready and then put everything away after sailing.

Figure 37 Ray and author (at the helm) sailing at Aqaba (unknown)

The Gulf provided almost ideal sailing conditions much of the time with calm seas, a steady onshore breeze and constant sunshine. In addition, we had much of the coastal waters to ourselves, as long as we kept clear of the port and water-skiers. Ships would glide noiselessly to a halt near the port and leave just as silently, the only warning being a rattling anchor chain and a puff of exhaust from a funnel. We had to keep alert and once when using a ship as a buoy to mark the sailing course for a race, the ship weighed anchor and departed without warning. Ray, being a buyer, was deprived of the element of risk and danger associated with working on a construction

site and was determined to spice things up when sailing. Two fast patrol boats, each manned by two Jordanian sailors with fixed machine-guns, were on constant duty to prevent any deliberate or accidental encroachment of boats into Israeli waters (or vice versa) which would provoke a diplomatic incident. These patrol boats would position themselves opposite the King's palace and race to warn any potential transgressors of the border. Ray regarded this as a challenge of nerves, ignoring any initial "go back" arm waving warnings and waiting until the Jordanian navy started to chase after him. He liked to do this when I was also in the dinghy, determined to show off his bravado.

I was to discover that there was a benefit in having access to a sailing boat, having the opportunity to be able to offer the occasional passing female tourist a trip out to sea! By now, I was becoming quite accomplished at sailing a dinghy single-handed in fairly stiff breezes and I sailed out beyond the places where the ships anchored, trusting in my ability to handle any changes in the wind direction or velocity. The rudder of the boat had a habit of jumping out of the gudgeon, the plate which holds the rudder pins or pintles. This usually only happened when the boat grounded in shallow waters, and I had tied the rudder to the boat with a thin rope. On one occasion, I was among the moored ships with a strong breeze giving a lively and exhilarating ride. I turned about, going on to a broad reach, the boat keeled over and the rudder suddenly jumped off the gudgeon. The wind filled the mainsail, and the dinghy rushed through the water at great speed towards the high vertical steel walled hull of a nearly empty cargo vessel. I knew that the mainsail needed to be physically pulled down and that this would probably prove impossible with the force of the wind filling the sail. I tried repeatedly to put the rudder back into position but the force of the water streaming past made this difficult. The situation became desperate, I was now seconds from disaster and the boat was about to smash into the massive steel hull of the ship. The fibreglass dinghy would no doubt disintegrate, hurling me on to the ship's hull, probably with fatal results. I found superhuman

strength to put the rudder back on the pins and averted a disaster with seconds to spare.

One of the other expats, Dave, a senior engineer, asked me one day if I could teach him to sail and so I selected a day when there was a gentle breeze to go out in a dinghy into the bay a little beyond the area where the ships set anchor. I was teaching Dave how to gybe, that is, to turn the boat about by allowing the boom to swing from one side to another, a manoeuvre which can be tricky and is best undertaken in light winds. We tried this a few times and then I looked up - straight at the huge bulbous bow of a ship which was moving silently straight towards us. It was so close that I could not see the ship's bridge and it was obvious that no one on board had seen us. We had just enough time to get out of the way to avoid being capsized in the wash and swept along the length of the ship, possibly being sucked into the propellers which were partially out of the water in the lightly laden ship.

The weather in the Gulf of Aqaba was normally calm but storms were not unknown and one day, a storm with high winds approached from the south. The storm-force wind caused a ship in the bay to drag its anchor, ending up stern first on the beach of the Coral Beach Hotel. Ray and I went to look at the stranded ship which had some cargo destined for our project on board. After inspecting the stricken vessel, I accompanied Ray as he drove off to the local shipping agent, without him explaining his intentions to me. I was more than a little surprised when Ray suddenly came up with a proposal to salvage the ship. The following day was a Sunday when no work would be taking place on the port construction. Ray proposed that the project tug could be used to tow the ship off the beach and the proceeds of the salvage fee be split between the shipping agent, himself and me! The tug captain would have to be persuaded to help us and get a cut of the fee as well. The shipping agent would claim that we were a salvage company and put in the paperwork for a salvage claim. All this was of course highly irregular, but it could have made us all quite rich. However, the risks associated with this stratagem were enormous. We had to persuade the tug's captain to cooperate, and we had no experience in towing a

ship; the tow rope could have snapped or become tangled, possibly capsizing the tug or causing any number of accidents. Tarmac would undoubtedly have sacked both of us if they had learned of the incident, as the tug was almost certainly not insured for this unauthorised use. Oh, and finally, we could have been incriminated as fraudsters posing as a salvage company and found ourselves languishing in a Jordanian jail. I was, therefore, somewhat aghast to learn that I had been unintentionally roped in on Ray's audacious plan. Ray arranged that we meet on the beach at 6am the following morning. I duly arrived at the appointed hour to find no sign of Ray and no sign of the ship. The stricken ship's captain had churned the propellers at high tide and the vessel had eventually freed itself. I think Ray had, by now, also got cold feet as he never proposed trying to salvage another vessel.

The tug was to feature in another incident. The Sri Lankan labour was generally a cheerful and happy crowd who, on Sundays, would flood into town, buying portable tape cassette players along with Boney M tapes to play. They would give a cheerful wave to any expatriate supervisor who they happened to meet and gave the impression that they were happy with their lot. They were recruited through an agent who would require payment and were naturally expected to work their contract to justify the airfares paid for by Tarmac. Their passports would be taken on arrival for "safe keeping" and only returned at the end of their contract. If they wished to return early, exceptions were made if they could not continue working through ill health or if they paid the return airfare themselves. Inevitably, a small minority wanted to return early without sacrificing their hard-earned pay – some were workshy, others may have had family problems or perhaps were just homesick. It would be unusual, as is the case in any large group, if a few were not suffering from mental illness.

Every morning, a small queue of a dozen or more workers would congregate outside the Tarmac clinic. As the site nurse, it was James's job to decide who needed to see a doctor at the hospital, who needed some over the counter drugs and who was trying it on. James was very adept at weeding out those who were not really sick and on

a typical day, only three or four would require the attention of a doctor. The cases he hated the most were those who claimed a back injury. He contemptuously nicknamed one of my steel erector workers "Glassback" as he suspected the man of being workshy but was unable to prove it. One might easily have assumed that James considered the Sri Lankans as being lily-livered given his somewhat disparaging remarks about them, but he adopted the same attitude with expatriates and their families, resulting in very low absenteeism through sickness and a festering resentment by some of the expatriate wives who felt that their little Johnny should have been shown more sympathy. But there was nowhere to go if one needed counselling or had mental health issues.

One morning about halfway through the project, it was discovered that the tug was missing. A quick search of the local coastline and harbour failed to locate it. It had obviously been taken deliberately, not just cast adrift, but where could it be? The answer was revealed later that day – it was in Eilat in Israel which should not have been possible as it would have to have breached both Jordanian and Israeli sea patrols. That night, there was a new moon and the tug was not spotted until just before it beached on the other side of the Gulf in Eilat, at which point the escapee was pounced upon by a crack Israeli team of commandoes. The Sri Lankan worker who took the tug must have been both desperate and mad, Israel not being the best choice of countries to arrive in unannounced. He was lucky not to have been killed as a suspected terrorist during the crossing. The incident was an embarrassment to all concerned – Tarmac for failing to secure the tug key and the failure of both the Jordanian and Israeli navies to notice the incident. Difficult negotiations followed in order to get the proper tug captain into Israel to collect the tug and then to return across a sea border, which was not meant to be crossed. There were no flights between Jordan and Israel so exceptional arrangements had to be made to get the tug captain into Israel via the occupied West Bank, otherwise known as Palestine and then out of Israel again by a different unauthorised route. It took over a week to get the tug back, but we never saw the culprit again; no doubt he was deported to Sri

Lanka for illegal entry, without fuss, as the authorities sought to avoid any publicity regarding the matter.

One Sunday, I returned from the shopping area of Aqaba, where I had met the usual crowds of workers. Unusually, I had the use of a pickup which I had borrowed from Ray, who was not using it that afternoon and after my visit to the shops, I noticed the site ambulance which was parked outside the Palm Beach Hotel. This could only mean one thing – James, who used the ambulance as his personal transport on a Sunday, was taking a swim. I stopped out of curiosity, as James rarely joined in activities with the other expats, and I thought it might be an opportunity to have a friendly chat with him. As I walked down to the water's edge, I noticed James wading ashore. Then, he suddenly sprang into action rushing towards me in a blind panic. "Stonefish" he gulped, "I've trodden on a stonefish!". James raced to his bag which he had left on the beach and pulled out the first aid kit. Inside was a syringe which presumably had some sort of antidote or pain relief, but James was shaking uncontrollably and was unable to inject himself.

The stonefish, as its name suggests has the appearance of a stone, being well camouflaged and looking like a rock or a lump of coral. It sits on the seabed at exactly the shallow location where an unfortunate wader may step on it, the extremely sharp spines easily penetrating the skin, injecting a complex and deadly venom causing severe to life-threatening neurotoxin poisoning. The venom is likened to cobra venom in toxicity, causing excruciating pain, rapid swelling, tissue death, muscle weakness, temporary paralysis, and in some cases death. The pain is said to be the worst pain known to human beings, causing the sufferer to become frantic and delirious before begging and pleading to have the affected limb amputated. There is another similar fish, the devil scorpion fish, which is slightly less toxic but whichever fish it was, James was in trouble. "Tell them Abu Laban" he hissed, "Abu al-Laban" being the Arabic term used in Jordan for such a creature. James succeeded in clambering into the passenger seat of the ambulance whilst I jumped into the driver's seat. James leaned over to set off the klaxon while I switched on the blue flashing light as we hurtled a few hundred yards along the dual carriageway to the

hospital. I rushed into the A&E department yelling “Abu Laban” at the surprised doctors there. They seemed to doubt my diagnosis and went to inspect James, who by now was as white as a sheet and barely conscious. James was immediately put on a drip, and I then visited Ray where I waited with his wife Debbie, who would be able to report on James’s condition through her contacts at the hospital.

Four hours later, James was discharged. He had been suffering from severe shock but had no venom inside him. He probably had stood on a stonefish or scorpion fish, managing to escape being injected with poison. Being a nurse, he was aware of the terrible effects such a fish can cause and as a result experienced the symptoms of shock. The community at the Shwekini building were largely sympathetic, but this was not the case with some of the married women who could not conceal their mirth at the incident, having experienced a less than sympathetic James when he came to assess their family illnesses. I rarely went swimming at the Palm Beach after that and when I did, ensured that I was wearing canvas shoes. The sea looked so benign but could nevertheless be a dangerous place.

Figure 38 The author (right) with colleagues on the Coral Beach (unknown)

7. Occupied territory

Jordan's river is deep and wide, hallelujah.
Meet my mother on the other side, hallelujah.
Jordan's river is chilly and cold, hallelujah.
Chills the body, but not the soul, hallelujah

Pete Seeger version of "Michael Row the Boat Ashore"

Decisions, decisions! Where does one go when it is time to take the two weeks' leave which is permitted every six months? Most expats just went home, visiting family and possibly a partner or girlfriend, although few girlfriends would remain faithful after such a long separation. My first adventure came when I was working in Oman. I liked the sound of Istanbul, previously known as Constantinople, a place that conjured up Turkish Delight, which as the advertisements for the Fry's confectionery at the time stated, was "Full of Eastern promise". I could stop over on my way from Aqaba back to the UK to visit my parents, an opportunity which was too good to miss.

After finding a suitable hotel, I set about exploring the city and its sights, using taxis when necessary. The Hagia Sophia with its huge dome and vast basilica was particularly impressive and as dusk settled over the Bosphorus, the twinkling lights on each shoreline together with those of the ferries made for a magical scene. I was lured into leaving my hotel the second evening of my visit, savouring the atmosphere. A young man approached me whilst walking near my hotel and asked in a mixture of German and broken English if I was going to the fair. I understood a little German and managed to communicate that I had no such plans whereupon he said he would show me where it was. A short distance away, the streets gave way to some rough unpaved and unlit open terrain beyond which I could make out the lights and sounds of the fair. "It is only a ten-minute walk" he told me and so I set off with my companion. As we left the

streets and strolled along a gravel path, he gave a loud whistle, and three other figures ran towards me from their hiding place. I knew I was about to be robbed and foolishly fought to keep them from raiding my pockets. After the attack, I wandered back to the hotel, my trousers torn and bloodied from the fierce struggle and with a black eye and broken spectacles. Fortunately, I had little money on me and my passport was locked in my suitcase at the hotel, so the robbery could have had more serious consequences. My assailants had, however, taken the key which unlocked my suitcase which I would now have to force open.

As I was leaving the following morning, I decided not to report the incident to the police, not wishing to miss my flight, spending the morning at a Turkish police station with little possibility of the offenders being caught. Now it was daylight, I wandered ruefully back to the scene of the assault to see if there were any coins scattered on the ground. There were indeed, right above a drop of about three metres over a rocky ledge. Had I been pushed over the ledge, I would have suffered terrible injuries or possibly death and it also occurred to me that my attackers had not used weapons such as knives. Counting my blessings, I returned to the hotel and caught the airport bus. Three hours later when I was sitting in my seat on the flight which was about to leave, there was an announcement on the aircraft address system for a Brian Davies to make himself known to the crew. Somewhat surprised, I made myself known and was told that I must disembark from the aircraft, wondering if this was in any way related to the incident. I was relieved and embarrassed to find that I had passed the immigration control at Istanbul airport without having been recorded as leaving the country – the immigration officer had vacated his post, and I had not waited for him to return. On production of my passport, I was whisked back to the plane which had delayed the take-off for me.

I had learnt a valuable lesson – that being a solo traveller in certain countries was inadvisable and that going with a group, if that could be arranged, was less hazardous. On my first annual leave in Jordan, I just returned home but for my second in the winter of 1978, I joined a group of six site engineers and administration staff to visit

the Holy Land and Israel. Normally, a visit to Israel would not be an easy task from within an Arab country, such countries having hostile relations with Israel because of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, but the situation with Jordan was particularly intriguing.

It was in 1948 that Jordan fought with the newly created state of Israel to gain control of former Mandatory Palestine, known as the West Bank, as it is on the western flank of the River Jordan. It became an annexe, but Jordan lost the West Bank in the 1967 War with Israel, the territory becoming the base for the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) which was founded in 1964. Both Jordan and the PLO wanted to claim the West Bank and they formed an uneasy alliance which terminated in September 1970 after the PLO hijacked three planes which they forced to land in Jordan. King Hussein felt that he had little option other than to remove the PLO from his country and the two parties fought each other over a period of about ten days known as Black September, resulting in thousands of casualties. The defeated PLO, with its fighters who numbered in the tens of thousands, was forced to leave Jordan and relocated to the south of Lebanon, later fomenting a civil war in that country. Jordan continued to claim the West Bank until 1988 and in recognition of this claim allowed Jordanians and tourists into and back from this Israeli occupied territory. The Israelis considered the West Bank to be theirs and had no border control between this territory and Israel, thus enabling visitors from Jordan to enter Israel relatively easily.

Our group used a local travel agent who arranged a minibus to take us to the Jordanian border, about one hour's drive from Amman. There we passed through the checkpoint to board a vintage shuttle bus which would not have been out of place in a transport museum. The gear lever was about two metres in length, the entire contraption looking as if it had been hand built in a local workshop. The bus, which was compulsory, as no one was allowed to travel unescorted across the area between the checkpoints, chugged and groaned a couple of hundred metres to the King Hussein bridge, formerly known as the Allenby Bridge, before entering the West Bank and continuing a further five kilometres to the Israeli checkpoint where our suitcases

were unceremoniously opened and inverted, the contents spilling onto metal faced inspection worktops, each item and each empty bag being picked through by security staff. It was clear that acts of terrorism were rife making these very rigorous and thorough precautions necessary.

We visited the usual places in the Holy Land – Bethany where Lazarus was cured, old Jericho and the remains of its walls, Qumran where the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered and, of course, Bethlehem. We stayed in Jerusalem having a guided tour of all the well-known sites, but after visiting one too many churches, we felt we had had enough. The churches, many of them Russian or Greek orthodox would be dripping with gold leaf, silver, paintings, icons and jewels and at each entrance, a priest would stand in fine and ornate vestments, ensuring that we made a suitable "contribution". The story of "The cleansing of the temple" sprung to mind as we walked among the streets, clearing our heads of the spectacular show of wealth. That night it snowed – well it was Christmas!

Then, it was on to Tel Aviv by bus where we stayed in a budget hotel which had a small bar with a toasting machine for cheese sandwiches. To our surprise, we met up with the piling gang who had made their own arrangements, presumably with the same travel agent that we had used. We soaked up the atmosphere in Dizzengoff Street, the main thoroughfare for shopping and the views of Jaffa along the scenic bay. There was a visit to a nightclub one evening, but no Israeli girls seemed interested in us, and it became a bit of a bore. Towards the end of my stay in Tel Aviv, I was returning to the hotel, passing a bus stop where a young lady with a shopping bag was waiting. She stopped me and politely asked me if I would like to go home with her. Prostitution is outlawed in Israel which means there are no pimps and brothels, so ladies of that inclination arrange matters themselves, dressing in a normal fashion to avoid attention. However, I declined the invitation and returned to the hotel where the piling crew were rooted to the bar, having drunk copious amounts of alcohol to wash down regular helpings of cheese on toast. When it was time for us to leave the hotel, the manager came out to thank the piling crew

profusely, shaking each one by the hand. Unlike the piling crew, our group was not accorded that leaving farewell as we had not greatly enhanced the bar takings and contributed to making the hotel owner a millionaire.

We travelled by bus back to the Israeli checkpoint to exit the country and cross the Jordan River. It is important not to have an Israeli stamp in one's passport when visiting an Arab country, so the Israelis use a piece of card which is stamped and inserted into the passport and removed on leaving. The customs and immigration officers asked questions, looked at our bags and stamped the cards, replacing them in the passport, the particular officer who was on duty that day being in fine form. He was originally from Brooklyn, New York and his speciality was cracking jokes – well his job was not very stimulating, and this no doubt helped pass the time, but it is just possible that his attempts to perfect these comic talents distracted him from his duties. We boarded the Israeli shuttle bus which was of a much more recent vintage than the Jordanian one we had used to start our journey and headed the five kilometres to the King Hussein bridge. On boarding the bus, all our passports were handed to the driver to be returned later. Just before reaching the bridge, a guard stopped us to collect the stamped Israeli immigration cards which were in the passports – except mine was not. I was ordered off the bus, wondering if my colleagues would wait for me to get the issue sorted.

As the bus rumbled on without me, driving slowly across the wooden plank decked bridge, I looked around. There was nowhere for me to wait in the hot sun, just a single sentry box with an armed sentry. Nearby were about a dozen Israeli conscripts, some of whom were preparing for lunch. On the other side of the bridge was a large Jordanian guardhouse, those rifles which were not held by soldiers being propped up against the sand bagged walls. I sauntered towards the Israeli guard who challenged me "Where are you from!". "England" I replied, hoping this was not a country of which he disapproved. "Where in England?" he challenged me. I was somewhat bemused as to why this was relevant but replied "Birmingham". "I support Leeds United!" was his response.

Leeds United's glory years lasted from 1965 to 1975, but they were still a first division team in 1978, the first division being the top tier of soccer at that time. English football grew in popularity after England won the World Cup in 1966 and televised matches of the top English clubs must have been shown in Israel. At their peak in 1973, Leeds United were virtually unbeatable, many pundits feeling that they should have won more titles than they did. In Europe, Leeds reached 5 finals and 7 semi-finals in the period of 1965-75 which is not a bad record! At various times, I had actively supported The Blues (Birmingham City), The Gunners (Arsenal), The Saints and Pompey, but like many of the less partisan football supporters, could not fail to be impressed by the skills and teamwork shown by the United players under their manager, Don Revie.

At least the guard was not hostile to my being British, but I wanted to join my colleagues as soon as possible. I hoped they would wait a little while for me to get things sorted out – if they did not, I was in trouble. I would have to take a taxi to Amman which was a one-hour drive, find a hotel, get an air ticket to Aqaba on the first daily flight with vacant seats, take a taxi to the airport – all at a time when I had spent most of my available cash. I would have to try and get hold of John in the Amman office which would be difficult if not impossible, obtain a loan, miss at least one or perhaps two- or three-days' work with a resultant fine, get a black mark with my superiors – it was so awful I did not wish to contemplate the possibility. No one would believe that it was not caused by my negligence.

As I sat on the bare sandy gravel in what little shade the sentry hut cast, the minutes ticked by agonizingly slowly. Waiting for the immigration department to find my piece of paper and give me clearance to leave, I noticed that almost no traffic passed over the bridge – it was as if a siesta had been declared. After what seemed like a very long forty minutes, the phone rang in the sentry box to confirm that I had been cleared to leave and could take the next passing bus. "When will the next bus come?" I asked the guard. "One, maybe two hours" he responded. Was he serious? My colleagues might wait an hour at the most for me, certainly not two or three hours. Meanwhile,

I was an Englishman sitting in the midday sun without food or water and I wondered if I could last a few more hours – I just needed a mad dog to arrive to complete the scene.

I studied the border guards, the Israeli ones having mostly finished eating lunch from their mess tins and who were wandering around in the desert scrub looking rather bored and fiddling with their rifles. On the Jordanian side, things appeared to be much as before, two or three guards armed with rifles watching the Israelis on the other bank, a large collection of firearms still propped up on the sandbag wall. I approached the Israeli sentry and asked somewhat desperately "Will I get shot if I walk across the bridge?" He responded drily with "I won't shoot you!". Was this reassuring? It reduced the number of border guards who might shoot me by one, slightly improving the odds of my making it.

It was worth a try. I gingerly approached the bridge expecting a soldier to shout at me to go back. All was quiet. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a white handkerchief which I held at shoulder height. I was unsure if this was a good tactic or not as it gave the soldiers something to aim at but at the same time indicated that I was not trying to sneak across undetected. I continued walking slowly towards the centre of the bridge; was I "dead man walking"? I paused slightly as I passed over the Jordan River, once a significant river which drained into the Dead Sea, but which had in the last decade or so become just a large stream, much of the flow having been diverted upstream for irrigation purposes. I then continued walking slowly, staring straight ahead, expecting to hear the sharp crack of a rifle shot and feel the searing pain of a bullet at any second.

I was in luck; my six colleagues had waited for me in the minibus although they had by now become impatient and would not have stayed much longer. "What happened?" they asked. "Trouble with my documentation" I replied. I spared them the details; we were now "The Magnificent Seven" once again.

* *

“Cyprus?” I said, with a hint of sarcasm in my voice. “A seaside resort?”. It seemed a bit odd, living in a town with a beach and going on vacation to another. The local travel agent had suggested Larnaca and had obtained a good deal for a group booking. The rest of my colleagues were looking for a little rest and recuperation after the pressures of working long hours in a hot and humid climate, not adventure. Well, having nothing else planned, I said I would join them, setting off on the journey which involved a minibus to Amman, a Middle Eastern Airlines (MEA) flight to Beirut and a transfer to a Cyprus Airlines flight to Larnaca.

The recent histories of both The Lebanon and Cyprus had involved a fair amount of bloodshed. As is often the case, the Western Powers were not completely blameless. After the Cold War with Russia, Lebanon started to polarize between the Christian Maronites who sided with the West and the pan-Arab factions who tended to side with Russia and Soviet-aligned Arab countries. The PLO which had been ousted from Jordan and had settled in the south of the country tried to become increasingly influential and fighting erupted in 1975 between their forces and the Maronite militias. Other parties then weighed in including Israel and Syria, and allegiances sometimes shifted from one side to the other during the civil war which followed, much of the fighting being in the Beirut area. Between 1975 and 1977, Beirut airport lost its status as the premier hub airport in the region, leaving only MEA and Trans Mediterranean Lebanese Airways still operating. With the civil war still raging but slightly less intense, repairs were made to the terminal in 1977 and in due course, Cyprus Airways put on a weekly flight to Larnaca.

At the same time, Cyprus was having its own civil war. In 1974, Turkish forces invaded Northern Cyprus in response to a Greek military junta which wished to annexe Cyprus to Greece. The Turkish forces claimed to be on a peacekeeping mission, which it may have been initially, but a second invasion which followed was difficult to justify and led to accusations of Turkish imperialism. Many civilians were displaced with numerous atrocities being committed by both sides, the capital, Nicosia, becoming a partitioned city, Turkish to the north and

Greek to the south. Nicosia airport was heavily bombed by the Turkish air force in 1974, and the airport was abandoned in 1975 when Larnaca Airport took over as the main airport for Cyprus. Cyprus Airlines lost a number of aircraft in the fighting and three were rescued from Nicosia Airport in 1977 by British Airways staff. By 1979, Cyprus Airways was slowly rebuilding its fleet, and a BAC 111 aircraft was used on the flight to Larnaca.

The main Jordanian television news channel in English tended to concentrate on what King Hussein had done on any particular day – reviewing his troops, opening a building, attending a conference – so we were somewhat ignorant of what was going on elsewhere in the Middle East at that time. A recently released (2010) sanitized version of a secret CIA Directorate of Intelligence memorandum from the US Terrorism Analysis Branch and dated 1985 makes for interesting reading (the original US spelling is retained).

Beirut International Airport has been used by terrorists for many years as a transit point for travel, or as a site for terrorist activities or attacks. The majority of airport employees are Shia, and evidence indicates that customs clerks, porters, and taxi drivers provide an "in place" kidnaping network for Shia groups hoping to abduct either foreign or Lebanese nationals going to or from the airport. Until 1982, Palestinian terrorists made extensive use of the airport to move materiel, as well as Palestinian and non-Palestinian personnel to and from Europe. Airline hijackings involving the Beirut Airport have been a particular problem. Our records indicate 36 hijackings – almost 15% of all such incidents outside the United States since 1970 – have begun, ended or passed through the airport. Various reports suggest that airport workers sympathetic to one or another terrorist group provide assistance to terrorists hoping to pass through the airport covertly. At present, security at Beirut International Airport is practically nonexistent. The airport is surrounded by impoverished Shia Muslim neighborhoods in which pro-Iranian extremists operate virtually at will. The radical Hizballah organisation is strong in most of the areas adjacent to the airport and, according to several sources, views the airport road as a place where foreigners and Lebanese Christians can

easily be kidnaped. The airport itself is under no central authority. Militiamen of various affiliations roam the passenger terminal, occasionally searching and robbing travellers. Firefights between rival militiamen have erupted in the airport several times. In addition to chaotic security conditions that promote terrorism, the airport often becomes a victim in the Lebanese civil war. Shelling and mortar rounds from the surrounding warzone periodically impact within the airport perimeter.

The two-hour connection at Beirut Airport was not in the forefront of our minds as we set off to enjoy a well-earned break in Larnaca. The Lebanese civil war had quietened down a little in 1979 and we naturally assumed that the airport would not be used if it were unsafe for travellers. Our MEA flight arrived on time from Amman, and we queued to collect our boarding passes from the Cyprus Airways gate. It was almost my turn and the portly Arab passenger in front of me was now presenting his flight details, or was that a sheaf of paper money? He received several boarding cards, and I was next. “Sorry” I was told, “the flight is full”. “But what do I do now?” I protested, “is there another flight?”. “The next flight is next week” came the reply. I stepped aside, waiting for the colleagues behind me to check in – the three ahead had already passed through the gate and were waiting for the bus to take them to the aircraft. The guys behind me in our party were also denied boarding. “What are you going to do about it?” we all demanded and were told that there was nothing Cyprus Airways could do, and we would have to reclaim any expenses from our travel agent. That did not solve our immediate problem, however.

Seeking an official who could help us, we drifted over to the MEA desk to explain our difficulty. We had the return flight to Amman which was booked for a week ahead and asked to go on an earlier flight. “All booked up” we were told. “How about another destination?” we enquired, thinking of Damascus, Cairo or Baghdad. This suggestion was quickly quashed with “All flights out of Beirut are fully booked for the next month”. We went to the gate from which the airport bus had departed, taking passengers to our flight to Larnaca. While we waved to those three who had made it, one of our number,

the senior engineer called Dave, was overcome by the impending loss of his holiday saying, “Let’s make a run for the aircraft!”. We had to physically restrain him, fearing he would get shot as a suspected hijacker, so desperate was he to escape from the situation we found ourselves in. We took a few steps outside onto the apron and looked back at the terminal walls which were peppered with bullet holes and mortar damage.

We then returned to the Cyprus Airlines desk to find that the ground crew had left – we had been abandoned, so we trooped back to the MEA counter and pleaded for something to be done. “What can I do?” said the exasperated clerk. “Please do something!” was our reply. He wanted to get rid of us but was sympathetic to our plight. After further unproductive discussion, he finally said “I will see what I can do but can’t promise anything – be back here at six o’clock”. “Can we leave the airport?” I asked, thinking that there might be a convenient airport hotel where we could stay during our incarceration. “Certainly not!” came the response as if I was being totally unreasonable – well there was a civil war raging outside. It was about one o’clock in the afternoon when we decided to explore the terminal, looking for somewhere to buy refreshments. As I wandered through the terminal towards what I hoped would be a restaurant, I heard a click-click sound; it was one click followed swiftly by another, this being repeated continuously. I looked round, puzzled at the source of these sounds. Behind me was a militiaman with a submachine gun. He looked straight ahead with an expressionless face, as if drugged. He was flicking the safety catch on and off.

The “restaurant” was a bar which sold bottled beer and stale cheese sandwiches, nothing else. So, this was going to be our home for the next week! In the film “The Terminal”, Tom Hanks spends a few weeks trapped at JFK airport with friendly airport staff, a canteen, food vouchers and eyes for a beautiful stewardess. Well, Beirut Airport was a little different and the afternoon dragged as we waited to see what, if anything, awaited us at six o’clock. We grew increasingly nervous – would the MEA man turn up and would it be good news? The evening flight to Amman had been called and passengers were “queuing” at

the gate in the somewhat chaotic fashion which might be expected in a Middle Eastern airport. Our man did turn up, looking a little flustered. “Take these” he said, passing out four boarding cards – “the rest is up to you!”. He did not need to say any more, British reserve going out of the window as we desperately elbowed our way past widows, orphans, young ladies, businesspeople and potential hijackers to get near the head of the queue – everyone was fair game. We sat in our seats on the plane, glancing away from the cabin crew, trying to look inconspicuous as the remaining passengers boarded. Soon, the flight was full but there were still passengers with boarding cards waiting on the aircraft steps who were unable to board! A crew member paced up and down the aisle with a click counter, counting the passengers to find out what had gone wrong. She repeated this procedure three times, discussions going on between the crew, before finally giving up, enabling the aircraft door to be closed. As the aircraft left the runway and soared into the air, I breathed a huge sigh of relief – that was a narrow escape.

We arrived at Amman with just our hand luggage and needing accommodation for the night. The four of us piled into a taxi and Dave instructed the driver “Take us to a cheap hotel”. We were trying to minimise our losses and who knew if we would ever be reimbursed. On arrival at a four-storey establishment, the proprietor informed us that he was full just as the taxi sped off. “However,” he announced with a pregnant pause, “you can sleep on the roof if that is acceptable to you”. With no other option for consideration, we agreed to climb the stairs and take a look. The building had a flat concrete roof and in one corner was a pile of those straw filled mattresses known as palliasses. Above, the heavens were an astronomical delight, twinkling and sparkling in the cloudless clear and still atmosphere. “Do we have the roof to ourselves?” asked Dave. “Yes sir” came the response so we agreed to stay, each collecting a palliasse from the high stack. The toilets were on the floor below but none of us dared to inspect them, knowing that in all probability they would consist of a cubical with a broken lock, a dirty squat toilet with a hose, no toilet paper and no hot water. We lay down in our underwear without any sheets, gazing at

the heavens for about ten minutes, when some more figures wearing keffiyehs, the traditional Jordanian headdress, emerged from the stairwell, collecting a palliasse each and bedding down. “Enough” shrieked Dave, “we’re leaving” and we dozily followed him downstairs where we stood in the road outside the hotel cursing our ill luck. It was now after eleven o’clock and we were fortunate to encounter a passing taxi which we hailed. It was at this point that I took control of the situation. “The Sheraton Hotel” I instructed the driver. There was not a murmur of protest from anyone.

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By early 1980, much of the construction of the port extension had been completed and the exodus of construction staff and supervisors commenced. My two-year contract was up but I was asked to stay on for a few more months to finish off some of the facilities. Another leave was due but the expatriate crowd who had accompanied me on my two previous outings were packing up and going home so I had to arrange somewhere to go on my own.

The Great Rift Valley runs 6000 km from the south of Lebanon, down the valley of the River Jordan and after reaching the Dead Sea, forms Wadi Arabah, the wide dry valley which separates Israel and Jordan, with Eilat on the western side and Aqaba on the other. The rift then forms the Gulf of Aqaba and runs through the Red Sea before entering Africa and dividing into the east and west legs. It is the African part which is the most spectacular and references to the valley often just refer to the sections in Kenya and Tanzania. Perhaps something in my subconscious mind made a connection and gave me the idea of visiting Kenya through which the eastern leg runs.

I booked my flights and hotel through a local travel agent – Royal Jordanian Airlines (Alia) to Cairo and then Ethiopian Airlines to Nairobi via Addis Ababa with a return trip which was the outward journey in reverse. Initially, everything went smoothly, apart from a minor hiccup when an air stewardess entered my hotel room in Nairobi at 1am having been given the same room number. The following day I went on a guided minibus tour of Nairobi National Park.

The wildlife behaved impeccably as if putting on a show – warthogs trotted beside the dirt road, a giant tortoise crept along, oblivious of our presence and elands, impalas and Thomson's gazelles made an appearance within camera range. Three giraffes demonstrated their incredible long tongues at a salt lick, and this was followed by sightings of three ostriches and a harem of zebra. As a parting gift, a pride of five lions allowed us to approach, the male showing off his magnificent mane. It would not have been a surprise if the wildlife had all lined up and taken a bow at the end of the performance.

The following day, I visited the Mayer's Ranch in the spectacular wide gorge created by the rift valley, the Maasai Manyatta putting on a daily show, the young men with shields and spears and the girls singing and dancing with many rows of beads around their necks half covering their bare breasts. It was now time to purchase a few artefacts from them – a carved giraffe, a beaded bracelet and a bow and arrow.

Figure 39 Kenyan mementos

I set off back to Jordan in good spirits, having had a successful, if somewhat lonely break. The Ethiopian Airways flight was due to arrive at Cairo airport at 1am and I would need to spend the night there before catching the Alia flight to Amman at about 8am that

morning. This was not going to be a great problem as I could sleep in the airport departure lounge, stretching out on the airport seating and thus avoiding payment for staying at a hotel for the night.

A bus collected the passengers from the flight at Cairo airport, transporting them to the main terminal, where they all alighted except for myself. I remained on board, as my connecting Alia flight was scheduled to leave from a new departure hall which had been recently opened. The bus continued on its journey to the departure hall, dropping me off outside the door before driving off. I approached the glass door, expecting it to open automatically but it remained closed. I gave it a gentle push but to my consternation found it was locked with no sign of life inside the terminal which at this hour of the morning only had subdued illumination. I knocked gently at the door and waited for a minute, but no-one came. I looked around me at the silent airport – no trucks, no busses, no aircraft noise, no baggage tugs and dollies, no airport workers. I was tired and ready to bed down but did not fancy sleeping outdoors on the cold concrete paving. I knocked again, more loudly, with the same result as before. Peering through the door, I could just make out the form of a figure slumped on a seat. I knocked a third time, as loudly and as long as I could without damaging my knuckles. I never considered that three knocks on a door signifies an evil spirit or an imminent death. The figure inside slowly stirred and got to his feet, opening the door and enabling me to get some sleep on the vacant seating inside.

I dozed for the remainder of the night and moved to the departure gate at about seven o'clock. The incoming flight had originated from elsewhere and was now due to pick up passengers from Cairo before terminating in Amman. There were not very many of us waiting to board and the only other European was a young man of about my age. Being keen to share the story of my nocturnal lock-out with someone, I acknowledged his presence, and we started talking. He was a German who was working in Jordan and having introduced ourselves, we boarded the bus to take us to the aircraft. As the bus started its journey, I noticed a pile of suitcases at the side of an aircraft stand close to the departure lounge. I gazed at them with

idle curiosity, wondering if my distinctive blue zipper bag was among them. I gasped when I saw it, muttering to my companion “I have just seen my bag. I bet I will never see it again!” He immediately diverted his gaze to the same pile of baggage and exclaimed “My bag is there too!”.

The bus pulled up beside the wheeled passenger stairs leading to the Alia jet aircraft parked on a remote stand. As other bus passengers boarded, my German colleague and I harangued the member of ground staff. Demands of “We want our bags put on the flight!” were met with “It is too late, but we will put your bags on the next flight.” Neither of us was convinced with this explanation, our confidence in Cairo airport being at rock bottom. I had now resigned myself to the fact that I would not see my Kenyan souvenirs and a few soiled safari clothes ever again. I stepped forward to board the stairs when my German companion yelled “Stop!”. Surprised, I turned around to face him. “Come with me” he instructed. Puzzled, but intrigued, I followed him. He walked round to the front of the aircraft, standing just in front of the nose wheel. The member of ground staff followed us, wondering what we were doing. “We will stay here until our baggage is loaded” intoned my German “friend” for we had bonded as a couple who were fighting Egyptian incompetence. The wind whipped at my trousers, and I glanced to my left towards the runway, my gaze being met with a yellowy-brown impenetrable sand-laden mist which was starting to block out the sun. The approaching sandstorm was not far off. “Please board now” pleaded the Alia agent, “we will forward your belongings”. My newly acquired comrade did not budge, defiantly stating “We will stay here until our bags are put on the plane!” At that moment, I wished that I were elsewhere, such was my embarrassment and fear. The agent started to speak on his walkie-talkie, no doubt instructing the crack Egyptian commandoes who were on standby in the event of a hijacking to see us off and leaving us reflect on our misdeeds in an Egyptian police cell whilst certain well-practised techniques were used to obtain our confessions.

We stood there defiantly for a few minutes which seemed like hours as the sandstorm edged closer, the air of uncertainty and

impending doom hovering over us. The aircraft was ready to take off and the sweltering passengers and crew were waiting impatiently without any air-conditioning, a ground power unit providing only enough power to start the jet engines. It seemed inevitable that the airport would soon have to close down, because of the approaching storm, trapping the aircraft on the ground to everyone's extreme annoyance and discomfort. The agent walked over to us again - "Please come quickly and identify your baggage". We walked briskly to a newly arrived baggage dolly which had been towed to the rear of the aircraft and pointed to our respective bags which were immediately offloaded and put in the aircraft hold. We raced up the stairs and averting my gaze from both passengers and crew, I slunk into my seat in the steamy hot cabin of the aircraft. The door was promptly closed, and we started to taxi, taking off just in time before the storm shut down the airport. I did not speak to my German fellow passenger during the flight – we were now just two passengers minding their own business.

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The development of Aqaba was proceeding at an impressive speed. New hotels were constructed or under construction and the previously empty roads now had shops, offices and houses along them. The unwashed Australian backpackers in a clapped-out double-decker bus were being replaced by beautiful blond blue-eyed fair-skinned ladies from Scandinavia who upon arrival on a charter flight would turn and face the direction of the sun, close their eyes and extend their arms, bathing in the warmth, soaking up the precious sunlight which had been denied to them during the cold and dark Nordic winter.

My duties as a senior site engineer involved finishing the building works for the port: a long perimeter fence, floodlit storage areas, port roads and weighbridges. My Australian colleague, Ray, also had his contract extended to finish at the same time as mine, his duties as a buyer including disposing of surplus supplies and equipment. One

of the more bizarre items he had to sell was a large quantity of canned mushy peas. Containers of spare parts and equipment were shipped out to Aqaba, many of them originating from the UK. On one occasion, it was discovered that only half the space in a container had been used up and the shipper in Wolverhampton asked if there was anything we wanted, so as to fill the empty space. The site supervisors, many from the north of England, were consulted and the message came back that they missed mushy peas, which had been part of their staple food back in the UK. Half a container load of cans had duly been dispatched and despite the best efforts of the Northerners, a considerable quantity remained. Ray had to persuade the local merchants that English people adored mushy peas and that they would have no difficulty selling the tins in their shops.

It was towards the conclusion of my contract that Terry arrived from the London office. Terry, a senior director, had been allocated the responsibility of ensuring the Aqaba project was properly closed down which included recording lessons learned and production rates. Terry was also the Tarmac director allocated to a consortium in Peru in which Tarmac had a role, Peru being a country I had been interested in visiting ever since Tarmac were awarded the contract while I was working In Portsmouth. I resolved to be Terry's "go to" man while he was in Aqaba, making myself as useful as possible and showing interest in his work, both in Jordan and Peru. My strategy appeared to be working and we seemed to get on well during his three-week stay, but once he left, I never heard from him again.

Ray informed me that Debbie, his wife, was expecting her first child and that she would be leaving with about two months of her pregnancy remaining, staying with relatives in Devon while Ray saw out his contract. With Debbie safely in Devon, Ray dropped his bombshell – "Why don't we go back to the UK overland?". Aussies are used to travelling long distances and have ten notable deserts of their own, so perhaps I should not have been so taken aback. Travel through Europe would not be a problem, I explained, but getting to Europe might be difficult. I went out and brought a Bartholomew's map of the Middle East, looking for an excuse as to why such a journey would be

impractical. We only had to travel the length of Syria, and we would be in Turkey and part of Turkey was in Europe. It certainly looked feasible, and once we reached Europe, we could use the very efficient rail network to take us wherever we felt inclined to go. Geography had been one of my favourite subjects at school and I could memorise much of Western Europe, enabling us to manage without a map. I therefore agreed, but Ray had a further stipulation; he had to be in Devon in time for the birth and that would give us just three weeks to make the journey.

There were no camping shops in Aqaba, and we had not come prepared for such a trip. I had a medium sized rucksack which would fit comfortably on my lap and a zip up bag with PVC handles – in those days, luggage did not have wheels or extending handles. I had no sleeping bag, foam roll or any of the other "essentials" which the long-distance traveller would carry today, so we needed to rely on finding cheap hotels or youth hostels along the way. I asked my parents to post me a directory of youth hostels but otherwise it was a "suck it and see" exercise whenever we arrived somewhere. Nevertheless, I was becoming quite excited at the prospect of having an overland adventure.

The Middle East has never been peaceful for very long, but the years of 1979 and 1980 were particularly turbulent. The Shah of Iran had been overthrown and replaced in February 1979 by revolutionary forces and relations with Iraq and the West rapidly deteriorated leading to the seizure of 66 hostages at the U.S. Embassy by November of that year. This was followed by the incident at the Iranian Embassy in London on 30th April 1980 when six armed men stormed the embassy, the siege ending in a dramatic televised rescue of most of the hostages by a crack SAS force. There was a long history of border disputes between Iraq and Iran and by August 1980, war between the two countries seemed inevitable – Iraq actually declared war that September. The port of Basra was about to be closed owing to the border dispute and fighting, the port of Aqaba becoming Saddam Hussein's lifeline, bringing in urgently needed supplies and arms to support his regime. It was evident to those working in Aqaba that

something was afoot as the newly expanded port was rapidly filling to capacity. King Hussein and the West maintained cordial relations with Saddam Hussein, fearing the rise of the anti-western Iranian Revolution.

Syria had a bitter rivalry with Iraq, based on tribal and religious differences and Jordan's close ties with Iraq and the West would marginalise the country and could potentially lead to the overthrow of the Assad regime who would find themselves surrounded by hostile forces. Jordan had an uneasy relationship with a group known as the Moslem Brotherhood who had at various times both threatened and defended King Hussein's position. This group had been involved in religiously inspired disturbances in Syria in early 1980 and the Assad government accused Jordan of complicity in these disturbances. Tensions between Syria and Jordan were escalating at precisely the time when Ray and I were about to set out on our travels, although we were blissfully unaware of the full implications, until Syria suddenly announced that it was going to impose travel restrictions on Jordanians and citizens of countries sympathetic to Jordan, a visa being required to enter Syria. Britain, of course, was one of the countries friendly to Jordan, as were many other western nations, although Australia had for some reason managed to avoid being added to the list, perhaps an oversight by an official. Ray was therefore in the clear, but I needed a visa and it was fortunate that I had just arranged for a new passport at the British Embassy in Jordan as my previous passport was full of visas and entry and exit stamps and had no free space.

Getting the visa was the problem, as I was required to present the passport in person at the Syrian embassy in Amman at 10am in the morning, with collection at 3pm in the afternoon. The daily flight from Aqaba to Amman arrived too late for the morning collection of passports by the Syrian embassy and the return afternoon flight was too early. I would have to spend three days at a hotel in Amman and this was just not possible, not only on the grounds of cost, but also because I had no annual leave left to take. A taxi would cost twice as much as flying and my life would be in the hands of a driver with unknown, but dubious, driving skills, so that was a last resort. It would

be unwise for Ray and me to try our luck after the end of our contracts as we would need to carry a large sum of money with us in case a Syrian visa for me was not forthcoming. In that event, we could, of course, then buy a flight to Istanbul and start our journey from there, removing about one third of the overland travel distance, that leg being the most challenging and exciting.

There was another factor to consider. Neither of us had received any indication from Tarmac that there would be any future employment overseas with that company. Indeed, many of the returning expatriates faced redundancy on their arrival back in the UK. Not only had overseas work by UK contractors been cut back but there was a deep recession in mid-1980, with unemployment approaching 2 million and rising, coupled with a raging bitter class-war and an inflation rate in excess of 15%. I was in no hurry to rush home to an uncertain future and Ray did not wish to impose on his relatives in Devon for an additional three weeks.

The competition for construction contracts was intensifying – as an example, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, by the late 1970's there were 260 international contractors of which 50 were South Korean[20,] as well as local contractors who were becoming a major force in their own right. The South Korean contractors paid their hard working and productive Korean workforce low wages and treated them as if they were soldiers – they would march to and from their accommodation blocks to the work sites, the construction workers being forced to adopt a military style regime. It was said that young men had a choice – they could choose national service in the Korean armed services or construction work overseas. There was no way that companies such as Tarmac could compete any longer with the new Asian competition and apart from a few limited locations where Britain still had influence, such as colonies and newly independent former colonial states, overseas work had dried up. The recently appointed Tarmac managing

[20] As quoted in "Koreans in the Persian Gulf: Policies and International Relations" by Shirzad Azad.

director, Eric Pountain, had a housebuilding background and he decided that it was in this field that the future of the company lay.

I pondered what the future might bring; my plans of an overland journey and future employment were under threat. I needed some good luck, and I needed it right now.

Figure 40 Sunset over Aqaba

8. Border crossings

Where in sunshine reaching out
Eastern cities, miles about,
Are with mosque and minaret
Among sandy gardens set,
And the rich goods from near and far
Hang for sale in the bazaar,

"Travel" by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

It is said that bad luck comes in threes, so why not good luck? Some documents needed to be collected from the office in Amman and the senior site driver at Aqaba was dispatched to collect them. This was a golden opportunity, and I persuaded the driver to adjust the timing of his journey to suit my needs of visiting the Syrian Embassy to obtain my visa. I handed in my passport as soon as the embassy opened, desperately hoping that the embassy officials would grant me a visa by 3pm, when we had to head back to Aqaba. At the appointed hour, my passport was duly returned and after opening it with some apprehension, I discovered some Syrian postage stamps and a fair amount of Arabic writing, my driver confirming that this did indeed appear to be an entry visa.

The next stroke of good fortune concerned the offer of a lift to get from Aqaba to Amman on the day Ray and I needed to leave, courtesy of the vodka-addicted office manager, Jim, who I had served during my barman duties. Jim had encountered a charming, well-educated, attractive, single, middle-aged Filipino lady during his business dealings, and they had taken a shine to each other. Lucky Jim! He had purchased a second-hand white Mercedes saloon for her use around Aqaba and he offered to drive Ray and me to Amman. The final piece of good fortune was the discovery that Phil, the sociable quantity surveyor and estimator who had helped me to settle in when I first visited Oman, was now working in Amman. Phil generously invited Ray

and me to stay the night at his apartment before we set off for Syria the following day and so, on 10th August 1980, we set off on our grand tour of the Middle East and Europe, uncertain of our route but knowing that we had to be back in England by the end of the month.

I had hoped that we might use a steam train to take us along the old narrow-gauge Hejaz railway to Damascus, but the tiny railway station in Amman was quiet; there were no trains that day for Damascus, so we then headed for the airport to drop off our unaccompanied baggage, saying our final farewells at the nearby taxi office. We had decided to take a taxi to the Syrian border, hoping to find a taxi or bus on the other side; getting to the border was one thing, leaving Jordan was another. Between many Middle Eastern countries lies a strip of "no man's land" and travellers pass through an emigration checkpoint and then another entry checkpoint for the bordering country. The Jordanian authorities had clearly had problems with travellers leaving without Syrian visas, getting stuck in the no man's land and having to re-enter Jordan, so to avoid this problem, they checked the passport of everyone leaving Jordan. I was waved through, but Ray was detained. "Where is your visa?" the border official asked Ray. "I don't need one, I'm Australian" he replied. "Everyone needs a visa" came the response from the official. An argument ensued and anyone who has tried to persuade a border official that he or she is wrong and that they are right will realise that Ray was not getting very far. In fact, voices were raised on both sides and the situation was becoming very uncomfortable. A nearby office door opened, and a senior official poked his head out, demanding to know what all the shouting was about. The junior official told him, whereupon he repeated the party line, "You need a visa to go to Syria!". Ray continued to argue, pleading "check, please check!". The senior official had had enough and looked set to ask Ray to leave but decided to prove to Ray that he was wrong, picking up the telephone and calling his office back in Amman. After a conversation of perhaps two minutes, he slammed down the telephone handset, glared at Ray and said, "You can go now!".

Figure 41 Map of Syria (UT Library online)

Getting into Syria was far easier than leaving Jordan and we were fortunate to find a taxi which had just dropped off a traveller going in the opposite direction. Our driver of the Dodge Cressida taxi spoke little English, but understood the word “Hotel”, so after the long featureless desert drive, we were dropped off in Damascus outside a very large and imposing building with the lettering “Semiramis Hotel” on the façade. On entering, we were confronted with a large lobby with marble floors and columns and chandeliers – this had been the first five-star hotel in Damascus and eight years after construction, although starting to show a few signs of a lack of maintenance, was still very impressive. It was obviously far too grand and expensive for two pack backers on a tight budget but having caught the eye of a

reception clerk, we decided to ask the price for a single twin-bedded room for two nights. It was then that we had our Damascene conversion, that is from Syrian Pounds to Pounds Sterling. I was astonished when told the price, having to recheck the conversion rate calculation. “We’ll stay here then” I said to Ray, hardly believing that the first accommodation during our travels would be in a five-star hotel. We had been through a tough day and slept soundly that night. If we had known the recent history of the hotel, we might not have slept so well.

Abu Nidal, a left-wing activist, was a particularly dangerous PLO leader. He, or his organisation, had a hand in numerous attacks and hijackings including the Munich Olympics murders. Less than four years prior to our arrival, four gunmen from his organisation took ninety hostages on the fifth floor of the hotel as a negotiating position to release two Palestinian prisoners and an Iraqi, held as a result of Syria’s President Hafez al-Assad’s intervention against the PLO in Lebanon. Syrian troops stormed the barricaded floor of the hotel, resulting in the deaths of four hostages and one member of the Abu Nidal gang. The three captured survivors of the gang were sentenced to death the same night, after which they were publicly hanged outside the hotel early the following morning.

The following day, we explored Damascus, the oldest inhabited city in the world, spending a considerable amount of time in the 600-metre-long souk. This was a marvel for every sense: the spectacular vista of the arched roof complemented by the fragrant smells of spices, the gentle hubbub of Arab voices and the puffing on the hubble-bubble or *nargileh* in the cafes. Every type of shop was here – those selling marquetry and inlaid wooden ornaments, fine brocade clothes for weddings, children’s toys, rugs and groceries. After buying a chess and backgammon box which opened to form an inlaid wooden board, we paid a visit to the Great Mosque of Damascus, one of the largest and oldest mosques in the world with its large courtyard, arcaded sanctuary and domes of various sizes. There were no crowds and Ray and I wandered at will, enjoying the spectacular architecture and amusing a young boy who wanted to be photographed. Perhaps the absence of tourists should have puzzled us but there was too much to see to allow us to dwell on this matter. Back in the commercial district,

we came across a small shop with a sign reading “Karnak Tours”, offering a bus service to northern Syria, so we purchased our tickets in advance for our trip the following day.

It was bright and early when the bus departed: a few businessmen, some young working men (perhaps returning home), a couple with a baby and us, the only tourists. The journey through the flat and generally featureless Syrian desert was uninteresting, and most of the passengers dozed, including the baby who awoke periodically for a feed from the breast. At Homs, our first stop, a few passengers alighted before we then left the city for Hama, our next stop. Hama, a city in a fertile area with a population which then numbered about 250,000, was a surprise as I had not read about the massive water wheels fed by an aqueduct in the centre of town, the wheels creaking and groaning as they turned. Most of the bus passengers alighted here and I took the opportunity to leave the bus to take some photographs and catch the atmosphere of this historic city which was full of ancient buildings and structures.

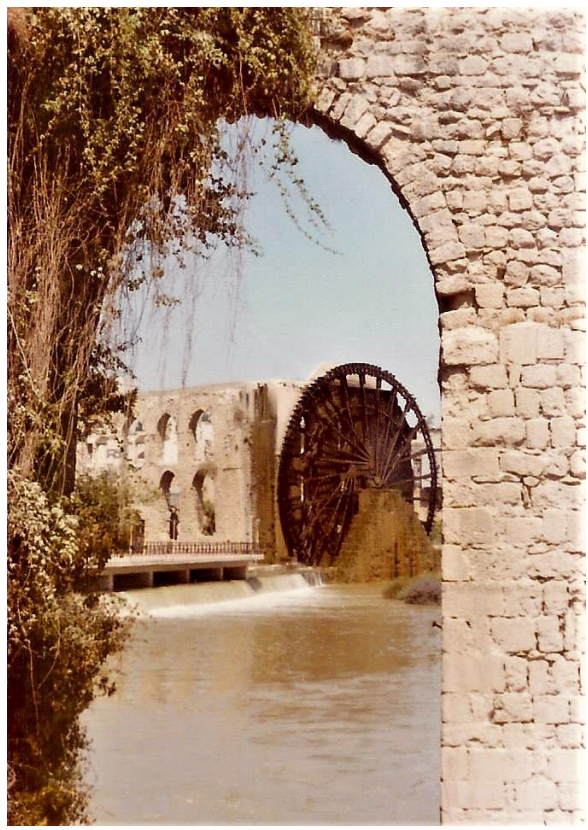

Figure 42 Waterwheels at Hama (Hamah)

With just a few Syrians to keep us company in the bus, we headed north for the ninety-minute journey to Aleppo, also known as Halab, the original ancient name and the current Arabic name of the city. Aleppo, Syria’s largest city and claiming to be one of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited cities, is a gateway to the Middle

East, having for four hundred years been part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, until placed into Syria by France and Great Britain after the fall of that Empire.

The list of famous names who visited the Baron's Hotel in Aleppo is quite staggering. Apart from Lawrence of Arabia, who stayed there when working as an archaeologist, other famous people included US President Theodore Roosevelt, Aviator Charles Lindbergh, Kemal Atatürk (founder of Turkey), Lady Louis Mountbatten, author Agatha Christie and her archaeologist husband Sir Max Mallowan, Julie Christie the actor, King Gustav & Queen Louise of Sweden, King Faysal I of Iraq, Queen Ingrid of Denmark, General Montgomery, Yuri Gagarin (the first man to journey into outer space), Charles de Gaulle, Gamal Abdel Nasser (the Egyptian President) and Charles Aznavour (the Armenian singer). The author Arthur Ransome, who wrote the children's classic "Swallows and Amazons", stayed with his friend Ernest Altounyan, who was a senior doctor at a hospital in Aleppo, bringing over a sailing dinghy from England for use on a nearby lake. Much of his third book in the series, "Peter Duck", was written while he stayed in Aleppo.

It was the citadel, one of the oldest and largest castles in the world, which I particularly wanted to see. In Jordan, I had wandered around the large crusader castle in Kerak and was now looking forward to seeing the even more imposing one in Aleppo. I had dozed off on the desert journey from Hama, but after an hour, I woke up and gazed out of the window as our bus approached the city. The first sight I saw was one I will never forget. We had not yet reached the outskirts, when I saw the awe-inspiring and breath-taking sight of a ring of battle tanks in a huge circle, each one separated from the next by a distance of about one hundred metres. There were too many to count, but there must have been over fifty in just the quadrant which was visible. The gun turret of each tank was pointing to the centre of the circle formed by the tanks, that point being the city centre. Passing through a check point, we then came across a further ring of tanks which were situated just outside the city limits. They too had their guns trained on the city of Aleppo. As the bus entered the city, I noticed sandbags and machine gun installations at every major intersection of the eerily

deserted streets. “What’s going on?” I said to no one in particular. “Moslem Brotherhood” replied a young Syrian man sitting close by.

When visiting a theme park or aquarium, it is quite usual to be close to apparent danger but without being terrified, the tracked vehicles or plexiglass tunnel offering reassurance. I had the same feeling sitting in the bus – I was detached from what I saw by a false sense of security which I felt the bus offered. As we pulled up outside the Baron’s Hotel, I saw the owner sitting on the steps of the empty building. He was most surprised to see us, standing up, pointing and exclaiming “Tourists, I haven’t seen any for a long time!”. Near the hotel stood the magnificent citadel, the sun catching its walls and making it stand out like a beacon causing me to remark “There’s a great Crusader castle to visit here”. Now, Ray was not what one might normally call “risk averse” but perhaps the impending thought of fatherhood was weighing on his mind. “Let’s get out of here – fast!” he demanded without any hesitation.

We arrived shortly afterwards by taxi at Aleppo railway station, the location of the opening scene of Agatha Christie’s novel “Murder on the Orient Express” where Hercule Poirot, having cleared up a military scandal in Aleppo, boards the train for “Stamboul” on the Taurus Express, which connected with the Orient Express on the other side of the Bosphorus.

The station platforms were devoid of rolling stock and the station shed was almost deserted, except for a group of four of five men in one corner. Even the booking office was closed, so there was no official to ask if a train was due. I approached the group of men, pointed at my watch and asked, “What time is the next train to Turkey?”. Unfortunately, they could not understand English, and I could not understand Arabic. They did not point to a time on their watches when replying. I repeated this several times as other groups wandered across the station, perhaps using the location as a meeting point. After ten minutes, I finally happened upon a man who spoke a little English and I repeated the question. “Sunday” was his reply, and I then realised that today was a Wednesday and that the train must only run once a week. I subsequently discovered that M. Poirot had

left Aleppo on a Sunday in Agatha Christie's crime thriller written in the early 1930s, so it appears that some things never change. "Is there a bus?" asked Ray who was increasingly concerned about our plight. "Maybe" was the reply. "Is there a bus station?" persisted Ray, who was then advised that there was one, but it was not close by and the bus to Turkey, if there was one, might not operate from that location. So, we could wander the streets of Aleppo, hoping to find a bus which may or may not exist and may or may not have already departed for the day. There had to be another option, and that became apparent when we noticed three taxis waiting at a taxi rank outside the station forecourt. We approached the first in the queue and Ray asked, "Turkish border please?", whereupon the driver looked concerned, slowly extricated himself from his cab and waddled over to the other two taxi drivers. A long conversion ensued, leaving us on tenterhooks as to the outcome. At length, one of the drivers agreed to take us, and we departed Aleppo as we arrived, passing through the two rings of tanks.

In a modern world of 24/7 news coverage, social media, e-mail and various mobile telephone applications able to broadcast up to the minute photos, videos and messages, it may seem incredible that we had no idea what was going on in Aleppo. Not only did we have no idea, but the rest of the world had little idea, the truth, if there is such a thing, gradually emerging over a year later after Amnesty International investigations and research by interested journalists and writers. The secret police and visa regulations kept journalists at bay and Syrian residents kept quiet about events as they could be arrested as "spies" for any loose talk, so no one warned us about visiting northern Syria.

President Assad of Syria came from a tribe known as the Alawites which were a minority sect favoured under the French mandate. Many of that tribe had joined the armed forces which were now dominated by the Alawites and supported by Syria's new allies, the Russians, who gave Syria large quantities of weapons and military hardware as well as military training in exchange for the use of a Mediterranean naval base and influence in the region. The dominant

conservative Sunni majority resented both the religious dogma of the more liberal Alawites, but also the power Assad exerted. Extremists from several quarters sought to topple Assad.

Tensions had been simmering, but were brought to a head in when on 16 June 1979, the Muslim Brotherhood carried out an attack on cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School, singling out those who were Alawites and killing at least 83 of them. Things then escalated, as 15 prisoners said to be Iraqi agents (i.e., Sunni activists), were sentenced to death by the Government. The following spring, many Syrian cities were paralysed by strikes and protests, which were instigated by the Moslem Brotherhood, as well as other religious and secular organisations. The security forces found themselves in pitched battles and the government supported their security forces with tens of thousands of troops, tanks and helicopters. In and around Aleppo, hundreds of demonstrators were killed, and eight thousand were arrested before the uprising was quickly crushed.

The Islamic extremists formed assassination squads, targeting President Assad and his own minority Alawite Muslim sect and at least twelve Soviet advisers. On 26 June 1980, President Hafez al-Assad had a narrow escape, when attackers threw two grenades and fired machine gun bursts at him at a diplomatic function in Damascus. The dictator had, by now, had enough and decided on retribution with a series of deadly retaliations by his troops, many of them indiscriminate, starting with Aleppo where much of the opposition was based.

On 1 July 1980, special forces units rounded up a random group of two hundred men aged fifteen and over in one of Aleppo's districts, firing on them, killing forty-two and wounding over a hundred and fifty. This did little to deter attacks on government troops by militant Moslem Brotherhood members and others, who had, by this time, killed over a hundred troops and their Russian advisors. It was 11th August 1980, the morning of the Eid al-Fitr holy festival when special forces surrounded one of the neighbourhoods and ordered out random people from their homes, who were then marched to a nearby cemetery. The troops were ordered to fire, killing between 83 and 100

citizens, mostly children and injuring several hundred more.[21] Later, bulldozers buried the bodies, while some of them were still alive. On the following day, 12th August 1980, the Third Armoured Division occupied Aleppo and thirty-five citizens were taken from their homes and shot dead.[22] In addition to this, more than one hundred and ten people were killed near the Aleppo castle the next day, whilst other reports put the death toll as high as 1,900.[23] Possibly as many as 2,000 people were killed by the security forces during the siege, either during clashes, at random, or as part of summary executions and at least 8,000 were arrested.[21]

Ray and I arrived in Aleppo shortly before midday on 13th August 1980. It was perhaps just as well that Ray ignored my suggestion that we visit the citadel (or castle). Daniel Chirot wrote in his book Modern Tyrants: The Power and Prevalence of Evil in Our Age *"In September of 1980, I tried to visit the citadel of Aleppo, much to the amusement of its special forces guards who were running a political prison and torture center within its spectacular medieval walls. I was told that the only reason I wasn't shot for getting so close to the gate was that I was with my wife and we looked like stupid tourists instead of natives."*. That was in September after tensions had eased – it was what might be termed "a close call" when we were in Aleppo a month earlier.

Unfortunately, the "Siege of Aleppo" had not ended the confrontation with the Moslem Brotherhood. In the autumn of 1981, the Brotherhood carried out three car-bomb attacks against government and military targets in Damascus, killing hundreds of people. In February 1982, the Brotherhood led a major insurrection in Hama, taking control of the city where I had marvelled at the water-wheels, resulting in the military responding by bombing the city, killing between 10,000 and 40,000 people (figures are disputed). The Hama

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[21] "Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime". New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 1991. p. 15

[22] "Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East" by Patrick Seale

[23] "The al-Assad's Syria: A history of violence" Asharq Al-Awsat Arab Newspaper, March 17, 2012

massacre marked the demise the militant Islamic movement as a political force in Syria, for the time being.

Now that our taxi had cleared the final ring of tanks surrounding Aleppo, Ray decided to make enquiries as to what we might find at the border. “Are there buses at the border?” he asked. The driver grunted and nodded his head. “Are there Pullman buses?” insisted Ray, meaning long distance coaches as opposed to local city buses. Again, the driver grunted and nodded. I had the distinct impression that if Ray had asked “Is there a cheap five-star hotel with a swimming pool and lots of young bikini clad women?”, the driver would also have grunted and nodded.

We arrived at the border and left Syria to find ourselves in a scrubby wilderness, a section of no-man’s land, several kilometres wide separating Turkey from Syria. There was little traffic crossing the border and we were the only pedestrians at that time, a taxi being provided for the situation we faced. There was just the one vehicle, so it was “Hobson’s Choice” as we clambered into the door-less apology for a car, which appeared to have spent its entire life marooned in this strip of desert, never venturing near a workshop and long overdue for the scrap yard. I clung on to the door frame, trying to avoid being ejected as we bounced along the track towards the Turkish border.

As we crossed into Turkey, there was both a thrill of exhilaration, tinged with more than a little disappointment, as we surveyed the scene in front of us. Along the left side of the road was a row of wooden framed single-story buildings with corrugated iron roofs, but with no sign of any onward transport to take us forward on our journey. Nevertheless, we were safe – well not safe, but a little safer. Once again, we were unaware of the political situation and the dangers which resulted.

The 1970s in Turkey were troubled times with street battles between left and right-wing radical groups that resulted in thousands of deaths, perhaps as many as 5,000, and many injuries resulting from gunfire and bombings that occurred on a regular basis. By early July 1980, Turkey was virtually in a state of anarchy with triple digit inflation and military commanders decided that the only way to save the country from complete turmoil was to mount a coup. The Turkish military allowed the conflicts to escalate so that they could claim to

have restored order and gain popular support for their action, the coup occurring on September 12th, 1980. We arrived in Turkey shortly before the coup which quickly stopped the violence, but which resulted in 50 executions and 650,000 arrests with nearly 500 unexplained deaths in prison and elsewhere.[24]

Our immediate priority was to find a bus or taxi and I visited the first building in the row which housed a money changer to make enquiries about possible transport. I approached the clerk and asked, "How far is the nearest town with buses?". "Antakya, 40 km" was the curt response. It was plain by the demeanour of the clerk that he was only interested in changing money and not on giving advice to tourists. He might have helpfully added "there is a small town called Reyhanli, about 6 km away where you might find a taxi" but he did not. I looked at Ray, remarking "it's too far, we'll have to hitch a ride". We were about to find out just how difficult that was.

The border was fairly quiet at this time of the day, about two o'clock in the afternoon. It seemed that very few people wished to travel from Turkey to Syria and those that did were not arriving by taxi. In the other direction, there were a few families who were fleeing the situation in Syria, their cars and pickups loaded with household goods. The cars had bedding and bags strapped to the roof and each time one passed we looked intently for vacant seats, only to be disappointed. Just occasionally, we would spot a vehicle where one person might be able to squeeze inside, but unsurprisingly, the drivers of these vehicles showed no inclination to stop for us.

Although we had not eaten since taking an early breakfast at the hotel, the restaurant at the side of the road held few attractions – we might get food poisoning, and we just might miss the only opportunity of a lift. After trying to hitch a ride for half an hour, we walked to the far end of the row of ramshackle shops and restaurants with our luggage and sat down disconsolately at the side of the road. We had both run out of ideas. Ray buried his head in his hands, wondering how we had found ourselves in this situation and hoping for a miracle. I stared straight ahead, craning my neck to the right from time to time to see if anyone had stopped at the restaurant who might be persuaded to give us a lift in their already overloaded vehicle. After

[24] Various sources as used in Wikipedia entry "1980 Turkish coup d'état"

a further twenty minutes or so, I suddenly noticed two long distance TIR[25] trucks which had pulled up. I walked over to investigate, surprised to note that the first one had a British registration. The driver was sitting in his cab, finishing the snack he had bought at one of the local shops. I knew that I had to play my cards right to stand any chance of success.

I knocked on the cab door of the first truck "Hi, I'm stranded, could you give me a lift to the nearest town?" I enquired. "No, sorry mate!" came the response. "Please, I'm stuck – just to the nearest town" I pleaded, no doubt looking suitably distressed. The driver thought for a bit before responding "OK mate, hop in". As I boarded the truck, I now had to make known the unwelcome news that I was not alone. "I have a mate who is travelling with me – can he come too?" I asked wistfully. "No way" came the reply, "I can only take one of you". There was room in the cab for two passengers, but the driver was clearly suspicious in case we were not who we appeared to be and hijacked his vehicle. "Could the other truck take my friend?" I asked, knowing this was rather a stupid question. "Dunno," replied the driver whose name was Ron, "you will have to ask him". I knew that if I left the cab to enquire, my chance of a ride might well be gone with Ron driving off without me. "Could you ask him for me?" I suggested. Somewhat surprisingly, Ron agreed to my request, perhaps wishing to seek reassurance from the other driver that it was safe to have us on board. The two drivers discussed the merits of taking us, seeming to be far from convinced that it was safe to do so. After several minutes, Ron returned with some news "OK, then, but just to the next town." I felt a wave of relief as I dashed to tell Ray who still had his head in his hands and had not witnessed what had occurred. The two trucks had met up on the way back from different locations in the Middle East and were travelling in convoy for protection and companionship. We set off with me in the front truck with Ron, whilst Ray sat in the following truck with Bob, neither of us knowing how long our luck would hold before we would be turfed out. The main thing was that we were moving in the right direction!

[25] The TIR system is the international customs transit system which enables goods to move under customs control across international borders without the payment of duties and taxes.

The roads in Turkey at that time were not built to take large trucks and were just wide enough for two trucks to slowly inch past each other. Fortunately, there was little traffic and Ron spent much of the time driving in the middle of the road for a reason I was to shortly discover. Along each side of the road was a drainage ditch and behind this was often a line of trees with slender trunks. After driving for about twenty minutes, Ron suddenly swerved violently towards a boy who was standing next to one of the trees, correcting his alignment at the last minute to avoid plunging into the ditch and possibly killing the boy. Ron realised that an explanation for his erratic and dangerous behaviour was required.

In this somewhat lawless part of Turkey, boys would hide behind trees lining the main roads with a rock in one hand. When they noticed an approaching truck, they would move to one side and hurl the rock at the cab window, hoping to shatter the windscreen and forcing the truck to stop. The driver would then have to walk to the nearest town where he could order a replacement windscreen which might take several days to arrive. The local peasants would take the opportunity to pilfer whatever they could – tyres, fuel and if they could break in, any cargo. Little wonder that the drivers wanted to travel in a convoy so that one driver could keep a lookout while the other went to fetch assistance. It was a "high risk" situation whatever the driver did or did not do. In driving the truck directly at the boy, it was hoped that the boy's aim would be impaired. If Ron failed to get the manoeuvre just right, we could end up in the ditch with possible fatal consequences. If we killed the boy, we might be saved from being lynched by the local populace if a demoralised and corrupt police force arrived in time, but a long spell in a Turkish jail would await us should we survive.

Ron, who was the lead driver, repeated this avoiding tactic twice more before reaching the comparative safety of the town of Iskenderun, a town which was regarded as the port of Aleppo under the French mandate of Syria and which is still claimed by Syria today. It was our first glimpse of the Mediterranean, but it was far from a clear blue sea. Factories and mineral workings discharged untreated pollutants directly into the sea resulting in large bright red, black and yellow plumes extending several hundred metres from the outfalls.

But Ron and Bob were not stopping and pressed on. “Behind your seat are some cartons of cigarettes” advised Ron. “Break off two and put them in the glove compartment in front of you”. I carried out Ron’s instructions, a little surprised as Ron had not smoked during our trip, nor did his breath smell of tobacco. “That’s for the police when they stop us!” Ron explained, and sure enough, as we approached Adana, the police stopped us and ordered us both out of the cab. Two or three men entered the cab, looking for any transgression which would result in a “fine”, the tachograph being the starting point. After five minutes, they gave the all clear and we continued our journey. I looked in the glove compartment – it was empty of course.

Adana is near Tarsus, the town made famous by St Paul who was also known as Saul of Tarsus. Just to the south of Adana, at Incirlik, lies NATO’s most important airbase where underground vaults hold about fifty B-61 hydrogen bombs—more than twenty-five per cent of the nuclear weapons in the NATO stockpile. Most of the aircrew manning the base were from the US Airforce, flying F-4s, F-15s, F-16s, and F-111s although the RAF did also have a significant presence. The road leading to the entrance was lined with small shops and in front of these were hawker stalls, mostly manned by Turks but with a few Western hippies also selling items. The US airmen and their families were the obvious target, many staying on the base and only venturing just outside to buy souvenirs of their posting in Turkey or groceries which were not available on the base. It was an opportunity for us to buy some snacks to keep us going on the road ahead which would shortly be climbing the Taurus mountains. Fortunately, neither Ron nor Bob had elected to drop us off at the first town as agreed, so Ray and I must have been acceptable companions.

A new road was being constructed from Ankara to Adana but had not yet been completed so we had to use the old winding highway, starting between Adana and Tarsus. The road wound its way up the mountains with gravel berms or shoulders at strategic intervals allowing vehicles to pull off the road. It was while rounding a long curving bend with a gravel shoulder on the inside that I suddenly became aware of the presence of a vehicle on the inside of the bend. Overtaking on the inside of a bend is occasionally seen performed by top drivers on a Formula One racing circuit but never in my experience

on a public highway. This was a first for both Ron and me as Bob tried to pass us in his truck, throwing up clouds of dust and gravel in his wake which rattled against our windscreen. Ray must have been equally alarmed, as they just made it by a few feet, before they ran out of hard shoulder, nearly colliding with the cab of our truck. “He shouldn’t have done that!” muttered Ron somewhat unnecessarily. The long hours at the wheel combined with the standard of driving on the Turkish roads had clearly affected Bob. Perhaps he was taking his cue from the Turkish long-distance bus drivers who had to comply with a demanding schedule and overtook as soon as they encountered a slower vehicle, irrespective of whether it was safe to do so.

Figure 43 Early morning in Ulukisla. L to R Ray, Bob and Ron.

The light was starting to fade as we approached the small Anatolian market town of Ulukisla and the drivers decided to stop for the night on a gravel shoulder at the side of the road. The cabs had beds in the rear for the drivers, so Ray and I bedded down on the front seats of our respective trucks. In the morning, we had the remains of snacks we had bought earlier, I took a quick photograph, and we were off on the road again.

"Death Valley" was what Ron called the desert-like flat land that formed the shore of Lake Tuz, one of the largest saline lakes in the world. After climbing again towards Ankara, the capital city, we avoided the centre by taking a route which skirted the suburbs. It was lunchtime and we had not eaten a hot meal since leaving Damascus. "Fancy some fish and chips?" asked Ron. I thought he must be winding me up, but I bit my tongue and just said "great!". We were over a hundred kilometres from the nearest coast, the Black Sea, and the local food cannot have included "fish and chips". We stopped at a café situated below an apartment block and Ron ordered "four fish and chips". The café owner had apparently become accustomed to British truck drivers and their tastes and had put this meal on the menu specifically for them. Any meal of fish and chips is good when you have not eaten properly for two days, and the fish was a good deal tastier than the bland battered North Sea fish served up in the UK.

We pressed on across the Anatolian plateau, gazing at fields of huge sunflowers being harvested by peasants. It was late afternoon as we crossed the Bosphorus bridge, at that time the fourth longest suspension bridge in the world. The lights of Istanbul were just starting to switch on, bringing back memories of my earlier visit as we crossed the city, arriving at the Londra camping grounds. This establishment catered for long distance truck drivers and allowed visitors either to camp or use basic accommodation. Ray and I elected to have rooms and we both slept soundly after bidding our two truck drivers farewell. We could now relax a little, explore Istanbul and make plans for our onward trip.

"Bahnhof" I said to the taxi driver who did not understand English, but like most Turks knew a little German. At the railway station, I scanned the departure board and noted with elation that there was a "Tauern Orient Express". We could actually take the Orient Express! Those who are railway buffs will claim that I must be mistaken as the Orient Express ceased running in 1977, two years earlier. The term "Orient Express" was used rather indiscriminately, the one made famous by Agatha Christie being the Simplon Orient Express, also known as the Direct Orient Express which ran in her time from Istanbul to Calais, later terminating in Paris. This had sleeping compartments and a buffet car, unlike the Tauern Orient Express which had nearly

fifty-year old coaches, no flush toilets and was crammed with Turkish workers going to Munich, Germany. The Tauern Express was not exactly fast, stopping for several hours at each border crossing and this, together with the decrepit rolling stock, led to its demise by the end of 1979, just a few months after our arrival. It was perhaps fortunate that we were not sold tickets as the train was already overloaded with Turkish workers returning to Germany after the Eid holiday.

The station ticket clerk was, for a change, helpful. “What can we do?” we enquired on being told that all train tickets had been sold for the following day. “You could take a bus” he replied. “Can you tell us which bus goes from Istanbul?”. We were pushing our luck, but the clerk drew a simple map on a sheet of paper, indicating an address where he told us we might be sold a bus ticket. We followed the map and arrived at what looked like an apartment block. We checked the address but could find no sign of a ticket office. As we were about to give up, I noticed a faded arrow pointing up the stairs which we then climbed. Arriving on the first floor, we found ourselves on a landing opposite a large door which was half ajar. I pushed it open cautiously and saw a well-built lady sitting behind an equally large desk. “Bus tickets?” I asked. “To Sofia” she responded. Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, would be an interesting and unexpected port of call on our way home. We would probably be able to catch a train to Yugoslavia from there. We were instructed to wait for the bus on a nearby street corner at 9:15am the following day. We now had the rest of the day to find a hotel and take a sightseeing tour of Istanbul.

Ray decided that we must sample the nightlife that evening, against my better judgement, having had an unfortunate experience on an earlier visit. I could hardly refuse when Ray suggested, “Let’s go to a nightclub”. We hailed a taxi, the driver, as usual, understanding no English. “Take us to a nightclub!” instructed Ray, but the driver did not understand. Ray followed up with “Girls!”, hoping that this simple command would mean something. It did, and the driver set off, dropping us off about twenty minutes later, having taken us into one of the less salubrious parts of the city. As we entered the establishment where we had been deposited, it became clear that this might not be the nightclub we had envisaged. We were shown to a

large sofa where we sat and admired the plush interior of what seemed to be a waiting room. After a couple of minutes, a hag appeared, plastered with lipstick, eyeshadow and rouge. Ray turned to me, leered and muttered, “I don’t like the look of yours much!”. A second hag appeared, of similar appearance and it was time to get my own back as I replied, “I don’t like the look of yours much either”. We both beat a hasty retreat from the brothel, managing to find another taxi which did take us to a nightclub of sorts.

We were escorted to a table, where we were quickly joined by a couple of young ladies. They were keen to know at which hotel we were staying, presumably as a precaution if we decided to flee without paying. They only drank champagne, which they sipped throughout the evening, while making occasional small talk. Ray was determined to enjoy himself, despite the somewhat mediocre shows on stage which were being performed from time to time. It was after about the third bottle of champagne for the girls, coupled with our own drinks, that I began to realize that our limited funds might not be enough to cover the evening’s entertainment. I finally managed to convince Ray that we needed to leave, and we emptied our pockets, having just enough to pay for the evening. It was a little too close for comfort and I wondered what might have so nearly been the outcome as we walked back to the hotel, all our local currency having been spent.

The following morning, we arrived at our designated street corner five minutes early for the bus; we could not afford to miss this as there was no back up plan and we had already paid the fares. No one else joined us as we waited anxiously as the minutes passed. At 9:30, some 15 minutes after the scheduled departure, we started to grow somewhat alarmed. “Let’s give it another ten minutes” said Ray which we did. But after ten minutes, there was still no bus and no fellow passengers joined us at the roadside. “I think we have been conned” I remarked dejectedly. We picked up our bags and turned to walk back towards the ticket office some two blocks away. At that precise moment, I spotted a bus in the distance, making its way laboriously towards us. “Let’s just see if this is our bus” I said, more in desperation than with any real hope. But it was our bus, all the other passengers having boarded at a previous departure point. They were a mixed bunch; some Turks, quite a few Eastern Europeans and two

British backpackers who were bumming around that part of the world, trying to subsist on next to nothing. We clambered aboard and the bus chugged off through the suburbs of Istanbul.

We had not gone very far when one of the backpackers said to us “How much did you pay for your Bulgarian visa?”. I looked at Ray, who looked at me. We had intended to take the train and stay on it as it passed through Bulgaria, behind the “iron curtain”, thus avoiding the need for a visa. Our change of plan had caught us out. “Er, we are hoping to get a visa at the border” replied Ray, somewhat unconvincingly. Should we jump off the bus and go to the Bulgarian Embassy in Istanbul or just hope? “£30 for a visa!” exclaimed one of the back packers miserably. That works out at about £72 for each visa in 2018 values, considering inflation. It was indeed a large amount. “Thirty quid” repeated the backpacker, as if he had been robbed, which, in a way, he had. This would indeed set our finances back quite a bit if we were even granted a visa and we might have to pay a further penalty for not having one in advance. The anxiety of the visa situation somewhat overshadowed our enjoyment of the slow progress through European Turkey, as the bus lumbered towards Edirne near the Bulgarian border.

It was mid-afternoon when we finally came to a halt for a break at an area which had several roadside restaurants and bars. We, along with many of our fellow passengers, headed for one of the restaurants, while a few of the passengers and the bus driver drifted into one of the bars. There seemed to be no urgency as we enjoyed a protracted meal, keeping our eyes on the bus to ensure we were not left behind. After an hour and a half, we decided we had better board the bus with most of the other passengers, although the driver had still not returned. Half an hour later, the driver and the remaining travellers staggered on board. The bus set off in a meandering fashion in the twilight and it became obvious to me that our journey might not be incident free. I moved to the front of the bus and positioned myself directly behind the driver in the aisle seat, ready to spring into action and grab the steering wheel or apply the large handbrake. In reality, it was doubtful if I could have averted the bus hitting a tree or a passing vehicle, but I was reluctant to just sit and meekly await my fate.

Somehow, the bus made the few kilometres to the border post, where the Bulgarian border guards entered the bus and barked instructions. First off were all those from the Eastern European communist countries. They were lined up a short distance from the bus and interrogated. As a child, I had watched war-time films showing the Gestapo questioning British soldiers and spies and this seemed to be somewhat similar. If anyone did not have a convincing excuse for leaving their country in the first place, they were given a torrid time. Both Ray and I felt sorry for the passengers who were being treated in such a manner, wondering what lay in store for us. After about half an hour, the guards ordered those with visas off the bus, leaving just the two of us still on board. The travellers with a visa slowly returned having been checked out and a guard then gave the final instruction "those without visas". Ray and I wandered over to the small waiting room at the guardhouse and handed over our passports. We sat there in silence for ten minutes, as if awaiting sentencing. A guard returned and handed us back our passports without saying a word. We looked inside, and found, to our surprise, a Bulgarian visa stamp.

We boarded the bus, where the other passengers were seated, waiting for our return. I was relieved to see there was a new driver to take us on the long overnight journey to Sofia. As we stepped on board, one of the backpackers piped up "so how much did you have to pay then?". I left Ray to break the news to him; "nothing", he replied, trying to sound casual. The backpacker looked sick, really sick.

The bus pulled into Sofia railway station at about seven o'clock in the morning where we had to register. Foreigners were assigned to one of two hotels which were built specifically for them, our assigned hotel being the Europa. We went "sightseeing" but we didn't really know what to expect as we wandered through an eerily silent market which, at that time of the year, just traded in tomatoes. The few small shops had cans piled up in the windows in a pyramid. All the cans were identical and probably contained – you've guessed – tomatoes. The occasional young person sitting on a bench would ask us if we wanted to sell our jeans. Life was hard for the poverty-stricken Bulgarians and survival was the name of the game. We went bowling that evening in the other hotel assigned to Westerners, but we were not sorry to say goodbye and take the Panonia Express train to Belgrade the following

day. After crossing the border into Yugoslavia, the train stopped at the first station and a family boarded, sitting in our compartment. They had bought a picnic with them and set out a feast on the table in front of them. When everything was ready, they turned to the two of us and indicated that we should help ourselves. It was a very pleasant welcome to the country. From now on, it was youth hostels and cheap hotels as we made our way across Europe, arriving at a major city and then studying the station departure board for a train which headed in the right onwards direction.

Figure 44 Enjoying the sunshine in Belgrade

We journeyed on to Zagreb, Venice, Innsbruck and Zurich using trains with evocative names– The Simplon Express, The Alpine Express, The Transalpine Express. Then to Strasburg, the Mozart and Blackforest Expresses to Bingen via Frankfurt and up the Rhine by boat to Koblenz and on to Luxembourg. The final stages of our journey were to Antwerp and then to Amsterdam, before catching the Olau ferry from Vlissengen (Flushing) to Sheerness.

Youth hostels provide a great insight as to local customs and attitudes. In Strasbourg, France, the young boy and girl hostellers were dancing in the bar at 10:30pm, whilst in the Rhine Valley in Germany,

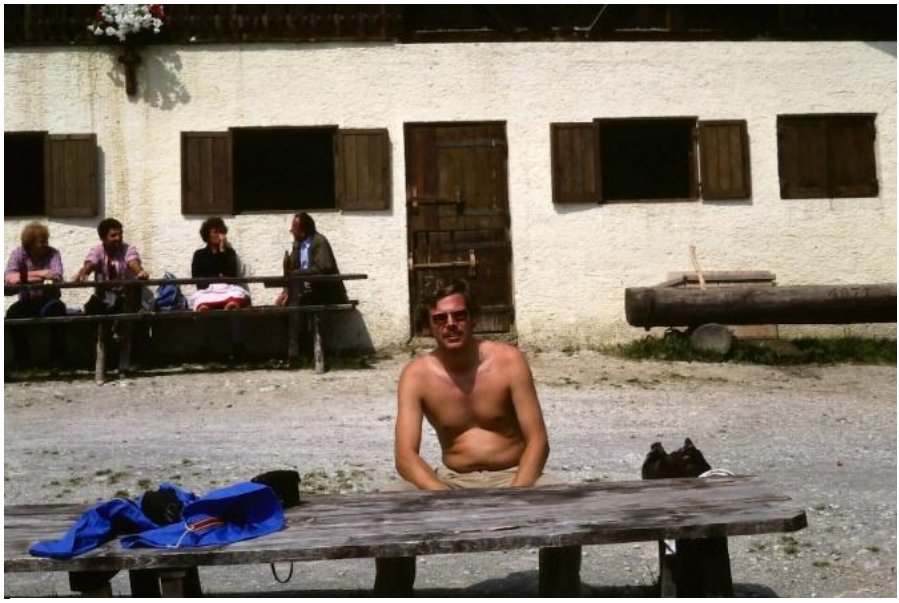

Figure 45 The author sunbathes near the top of the Nordkette mountain, Innsbruck

Figure 46 Our youth hostel in Luxembourg (right of picture)

it was strictly lights out and no noise at 10pm. They often just provided basic accommodation although the one in Luxembourg was particularly large and well appointed.

We reached England bang on schedule on Sunday 31st August, in time for Ray to witness the birth of his first born. The Isle of Sheppey conjures up the scenes at the start of the film Great Expectations – bleak foggy marshland where criminals are either interned in remote prisons or are on the run. As the elderly bus rattled its way along the narrow potholed roads from Sheerness towards Sittingbourne station, I wondered if I could adapt to life back in the UK. On leaving the train in London, I said goodbye to Ray, before taking the tube to Euston for the train to Birmingham, where my parents lived. As I walked up the drive and rang the front doorbell, I was greeted by my mother. The first words she uttered were "Tarmac have just called; they want you to go to Peru!".

9. El Condor Pasa

Oh mighty condor owner of the skies, take me home, up into the Andes
Oh mighty condor.
I want to go back to my native place to be with my Inca brothers,
that's what I miss the most, Oh mighty Condor.

El Condor Pasa – The condor passes overhead
(translated from Quechua to Spanish to English)

Sitting on the British Caledonian flight to Lima, I realised how little I knew about Peru. I had heard about the Incas and the Conquistadors but knew little about the modern country. And as for my knowledge of Spanish, it had not progressed beyond "Una cerveza por favor". I noticed on landing at Arequipa, on the domestic flight from Lima, that Peru was quite different to any country I had previously visited. I was not unlike most recently arrived expats in feeling a little disorientated and was booked into the Touristas Hotel within walking distance of the centre of Arequipa, allowing me to find my bearings and acclimatise to both the altitude and culture.

The project to which I had been assigned was called the Majes Project, being constructed by a consortium of five international contractors from Sweden, Canada, Spain, South Africa and the UK (Tarmac), the consortium going under the name of MACON (Majes Consortium). The ambitious irrigation project had been promoted by the then Peruvian President, Fernando Belaunde Terry in the mid 1960's before he was deposed by a left-wing military junta. British contractor, Mitchell Construction, which had hard rock tunnelling experience, was involved in early discussions and this company was taken over by Tarmac in 1971, when they sought other partners for this major undertaking. Perhaps surprisingly, the military junta kept the project alive, and a Peruvian contractor commenced work on the longest tunnel on the system in 1973. MACON came into being in 1974 and the initial work involved constructing 200 km of new dirt roads and the upgrading of a further 300 km of existing dirt tracks to several

large camp sites, where work camps for labour, staff, workshops and stores were built. Communications also had to be set up, including a dirt runway at the Huambo camp. In 1977, construction work on the irrigation scheme itself was able to commence. Three years later, the military junta which had overseen land reform, taking away land from wealthy landowners and giving it to the peasants via co-operatives, decided to permit an election. The economy was by then in a terrible state, with rationing, high unemployment and a shortage of all sorts of goods. President Belaunde Terry was re-elected, but he was not going to cancel his pet project, so work continued!

Funds and guarantees came from the respective partner countries, as well as from Peru and money was controlled very tightly. There was an annual spend figure which was calculated annually based on the available Peruvian finances and the money which was spent had to be divided exactly into 20% for each consortium member country. A certain amount of the finance came from Peru, a special department being created to supervise both the construction work and the Italian design consultants. The financial management required a considerable amount of monitoring, and a cost department was set up, primarily overseen by expatriate Tarmac staff with local Peruvian staff undertaking the detailed collection of data. I was assigned to the cost department but with a hidden agenda; Tarmac wanted me to collect knowledge on hard rock tunnelling which could be used in any future tender for work in the Andes. I was to be based in the suburb of Zamacola, near Arequipa airport, with occasional visits to the camp sites or “sectors” as they were known.

I quickly moved from the Touristas Hotel to the pleasant suburb of Cayma where I shared a prefabricated house (or villa), with a fellow cost engineer, Gerry. We both reported to Vince, an Anglo-Australian who was the head of the cost team and who very much enjoyed experiencing all that Peru had to offer. However, he hated his job and was frequently on sick leave. Our villa was on an estate in a pretty suburb called Cayma, which had breath-taking views of the volcano Misti and was away from the main traffic and bustle of Arequipa.

Figure 47 View of Misti at sunset from Cayma

The land on which the estate had been built had been allocated to MACON for their use and was now patrolled by security guards. Married couples had two story block houses and those on unmarried contracts had the prefabricated villas, with a separate building housing a doctor's surgery and some administration offices. To keep our place tidy and to undertake the laundry and cook evening meals, we were expected to employ a local maid. Gerry had been extremely lucky to find Beny, a young unmarried mother who was intelligent, honest and hard working. The first time I went to the local market, I took her along in my VW Beetle car to help me buy produce, but I soon gained confidence and would often go by myself. Meat was rationed, the German butcher only opening for two weeks in every four, but local chicken was readily available, enabling us to get some protein. The company provided a lady teacher to help me learn rudimentary Spanish after work for the first month or two of my stay, but I am not good at learning languages and my Spanish did not progress very much. Nevertheless, I was starting to settle in, eager to make my first trip to one of the sectors where the tunnels and canals were being built.

After a few weeks, it was very noticeable that all was not well with my health. MACON had employed three expatriate doctors, two of whom specialised in high altitude health issues. The one based in Arequipa was a Canadian called Jim, who was, possibly, not ideally suited to the position. He was not an altitude specialist – in fact he became sick himself whenever visiting the sectors. He visited these infrequently, taking a ride on the light aircraft, a Cessna Skymaster, which MACON owned, so that he could spend as little time as possible in the high Andes. He did not have a great deal of custom at his surgery and used to sit at his desk with his feet up, strumming a guitar. On one corner of his desk was an orange, which, Gerry told me, he used as an aid to practice injections as he was not very confident at giving these to patients.

Arequipa has an altitude of about 2,400m (just under 8,000ft) which does not usually give anyone altitude sickness, although such sickness starts to commence at any place higher than this. I was not, therefore, suffering from altitude sickness when I first visited Jim with unsightly spots on my face, a cyst on my chest and a swollen right knee. I was hobbling around, feeling rather unwell and embarrassed by my spotty face. If things didn't improve, I was likely to be repatriated before I had barely arrived. Jim arranged for me to see a surgeon in the local private clinic. On arrival at the clinic, Jim wanted to try his hand on operating on me and had donned a surgical gown, alarming the Peruvian surgeon who seemed concerned and who eventually allowed Jim to remove my cyst under close supervision. The surgeon inspected my left knee (my right knee had recovered from earlier and my left knee was now swollen) and declared that I needed an operation. Both men seemed keen to have a go at exploring my anatomy. I told them to let me think about this. That night, I had a dream that they were operating on the wrong knee – in any case, which was the right knee? I stalled and said I needed time to think things over[26].

Having postponed the operation, I was asked to visit the Huambo sector, largely staffed by Canadians and a few Swedes.

[26] The cause of my swelling knees and skin eruptions was never determined by doctors, although I now suspect my wheat and lactose intolerance with intermittent fibromyalgia was caused by Sjogrens Syndrome.

Huambo is at an altitude of 3,300m (c 11,000ft) and would be a test of how I adapted to the altitude. The construction site had a gravel airstrip and Jim said he would pay a flying visit after a week to see how I was coping. I arrived in my VW Beetle after a three-hour journey over gravel tracks and was relieved to find that I did not appear to suffer any adverse effect from the altitude. It was soon time to have my first meal and I visited the staff canteen where I was told, while waiting for my food, that they had been unable to recruit a cook, but had "persuaded" one of the mechanics to undertake those duties for us. The food was certainly modestly presented and ungarnished, but it was edible, if lacking certain culinary refinements such as sauces. That night in the bar, I tried a local favourite, a Cuba Libre, the mixture of rum and cola helping me to sleep soundly.

The following morning, I set to work recording the materials, tools, consumables and explosives used to construct the canals and tunnels. Many of the cost engineers were Peruvians who spoke no English, but I could communicate with Kent, a Swede who headed the cost department there. Halfway through the morning, a tea lady appeared and poured me a cup of black tea. I waited expectantly for the milk, but none appeared. Embarrassed by my inability to ask in

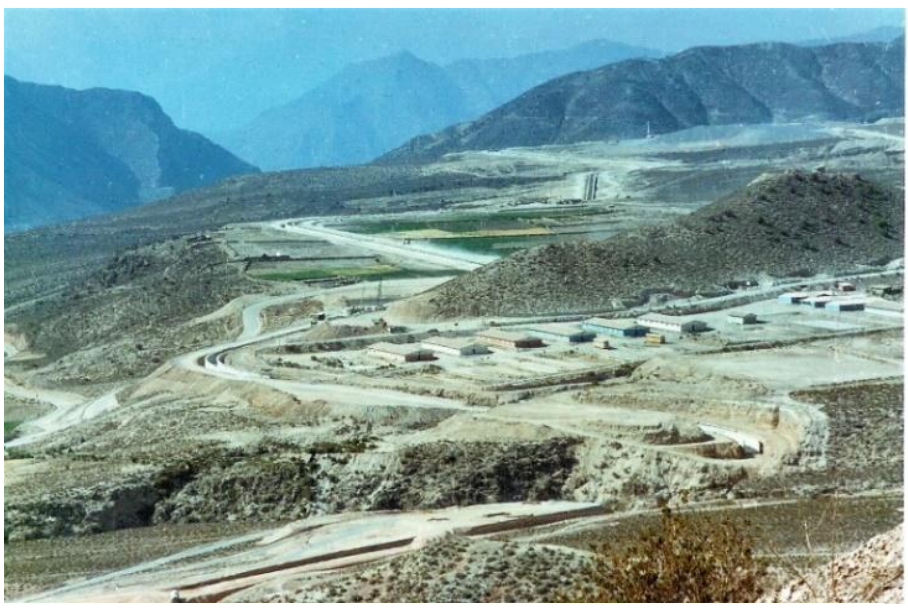

Figure 48 Huambo camp (foreground) with the canals snaking along the mountainside above the Colca canyon

Spanish for some milk, I suffered in silence as I drank the black tea. This was repeated every day of my stay and by now I was getting used to having tea without milk and food without any type of sauce. The only milk available was evaporated milk, known as “Leche Gloria” which would sometimes be poured over jelly as a dessert (now if I had been thinking straight, I might, just might, have guessed that the Spanish for milk is “leche”). After a week, Jim briefly came to see me, expecting me to be complaining of terrible headaches. “How are you feeling?” he asked. “Never felt better!” I exclaimed, my knees having returned to normal and with my spots rapidly disappearing. He did not believe me of course, but he did not wish to press the point, being happy just to take the plane straight back to Arequipa.

The first weekend, I became bored sitting in my room in Huambo. I was warned not to go exploring on my own, as it could take days to find me if I was lost or injured, but there was little to do at the weekend and the temptation to look around was too great. With no-one to go with, I decided to undertake a short walk of perhaps four or five kilometres and to be very careful not to twist an ankle. I ended up in a little valley and noted a stone wall built along an overhang in a rock formation. There appeared to be no doorway, so intrigued, I climbed up the mountainside to reach the wall. A few stones had been dislodged from the wall and I peered inside, where I noticed several bodies wrapped in woollen shrouds. Mummification was supposed to have died out after the Spanish invasion, yet the brightly coloured shrouds looked far more recent than that. I managed to retrace my steps to the camp, despite almost becoming lost – it is very easy to become disorientated in the Andes. I spent a further week in Huambo and resolved to keep away from milk just in case it was the culprit for my health issues. Perhaps beer, which I had avoided for two weeks, might also be responsible.

It was time to meet some girls! For some reason, there were more young ladies than young men in Arequipa. This was probably because young men would go to Lima or a foreign country to earn a living, there being high unemployment in the area, something which the Majes project was intended to correct (it was indeed a tremendous boost to the local economy even if the business case for the scheme was somewhat doubtful). Some young ladies saw the “gringos” as a

passport to a better life, perhaps not realising that the itinerant lifestyle might not suit them. Many of the expatriate workers had not previously married, simply because they did not meet members of the opposite sex in the remote and difficult areas of the world where they had worked. Finding a local girl to date was not a problem but finding someone suitable was. However, marriages between the expatriates (engineers, tunnellers, mechanics and tyre fitters) and local girls had become quite common. The long-term success of these marriages was open to speculation. One Finn, who could only speak Finnish, married a local girl who could only speak Spanish. They would gaze into each other's eyes, she no doubt dreaming of a fantastic life in Finland (knowing nothing about Finland) and he, dreaming of a companion who would look after him while he supped his vodka in silence.

There were certain girls who would be taken out a few times and then dumped for someone else. Some of these girls stayed on friendly terms with the expatriate community, ready to be dated by another expatriate. Peruvians are conservative by nature, the Catholic tradition being strong, and sex before marriage frowned upon. I dated a lady in her mid-twenties, Tessa, who had been elected "Miss Arequipa" a few years previously. My Spanish was still quite inadequate, but I asked her out and she suggested a café in the nearby

Figure 49 Plaza de Armas, Arequipa. Volcano Misti in the background.

town of Yura, noted mainly for its cement works! I discovered that I was not taking out one, but two girls – her parents insisted on a chaperone, even at her age. The two girls chatted happily while I provided them with ice-creams at a pleasant outdoor café near a stream. On a second visit to Tessa's home, she took me to the front room of her parent's house. Front rooms of large houses at that time were rarely used in South America, the cushions on the luxurious hardwood furniture being protected by thick transparent vinyl covers with permanently closed window blinds preventing the fabric from fading. Pictures adorn the walls with silver and gold-plated ornaments on shelves and tables, which can be admired when important guests visit or on special occasions. At other times, the room is closed, to be handed on, eventually, to the next generation as a relic!

Tessa didn't need to point – there on the wall was an enormous, framed painting with the words "Tacna y Arica". The piece of art was outstanding and would grace any museum, the proud family having taken a photograph, producing printed postcards of the icon. At that time, I was not fully aware of the significance of the event which was commemorated in the artwork.

Over one hundred years later, historians are

Figure 50 Peru, Bolivia and Chile prior to the War of the Pacific (Wikipedia)

still unable to agree on who started the War of The Pacific. It ranks, alongside the conquest of the Incas by Pizzaro in 1533, as the most disastrous war Peru has ever fought, mainly because, as was the case with the conquistador invasion, the Peruvians were totally unprepared. In 1879, Peru was sucked into a dispute between Bolivia (which at that time had an ill-defined zone, extending to the coast and known as Antofagasta) and Chile, over taxes Bolivia was making Chile pay on extracting nitrates from its territory. Peru had a treaty with Bolivia and when Chile declared war on Bolivia, Peru was asked for support. Some sources state that Peru entered the war willingly and historians are apparently still fighting that battle! The Peruvian navy initially performed very gallantly, scoring some notable successes against the Chileans. Unfortunately, their chief strategist, Admiral Grau, was killed in battle and the Chilean navy then took control of the Pacific (Bolivia did not have a Pacific navy). The Chileans chased the Peruvian navy back to their home port of Callao near Lima, then landed and confiscated the contents of the National Library which they took back to the Chilean capital, Santiago. The Chilean army also captured all the Bolivian coastal territory (Antofagasta) along with the Peruvian provinces of Tarapaca, Arica and Tacna.

Peru and Chile signed a treaty which should have released Tacna and Arica back to Peru after ten years. Chile did not honour this treaty, and much later, Peru, with the support of US President Herbert Hoover, managed to negotiate the release of Tacna, but not the province of Arica. Bolivia was granted access to the sea by means of “free trade” ports in both

Figure 51 Tacna y Arica (photo of picture by the owner)

Peru and Chile. Main streets and bridges in the large cities of Peru are invariably named after General Bolognesi and Admiral Grau who are regarded as war heroes. The picture I had seen, had been created prior to 1929 when the treaty with Chile had finally returned Tacna to Peru, the stormy scene expressing the anguish of Peru and its citizens. Both Peru and Bolivia still very much resent losing their territory and prized museum treasures to the Chileans, feelings that sometimes surface when Chilean businesses take over Peruvian businesses - telecoms, supermarkets, airlines, vineyards, etc.

My next girlfriend was a lady many men could have fantasies about. Let's call her Carmen – she was tall, beautiful, witty, intelligent, charming and spoke English – I could go on. In fact, the only negative point was that she had become a Mormon (if that is a negative) although she didn't try very hard to convert me. To round off her attributes, her smile could launch a thousand ships. This lady was certainly not "on the shelf" – she was just a little choosy and followed the Mormon belief of chastity before marriage! After I had dated her a few times, she gave me the sad news that she was emigrating to the USA where she had relatives. She no doubt married a millionaire and lived happily ever after – or perhaps she had to share a husband with three other women (just joking)! After my fleeting encounter with the delightful Carmen, I gave lady friends a rest for a while; there were plenty of other distractions.

* *

"Fancy climbing a volcano?" asked Gerry one day. The volcano he had in mind was Ubinas, Peru's most active volcano which had last erupted about 15 years previously[27]. Prior to my arrival, Gerry had been exploring southern Peru by car with our boss, Vince, and they had noticed a dirt track up the side of the lower slopes of the mountain. That made ascending the mountain and returning in one day feasible, if we made an early start. Some two and a half hours later, Gerry had driven as far up the lower slope of Ubinas as the track would take us. It was a long slog and the altitude started to affect us at about

[27] In 2006, a major eruption occurred, causing a state of emergency to be declared in the surrounding area. A further eruption occurred in 2013-14.

16,000ft (4,800m) at which point there was no more vegetation to be seen. There was another 872m to go – any height above 5,500m is classified as extreme altitude – and the last two and a half thousand feet were a struggle, three steps forward followed by a rest to gasp for air. As we reached the caldera, we noticed a yellow cloud positioned directly above the crater. We inched towards the edge on our knees and peered over the rim. At the bottom, two hundred metres below, were three fumaroles, emitting clouds of poisonous yellow and rust-coloured sulphur-laden gases. We could not, of course, see carbon dioxide gas, which is the invisible killer and we had no idea if this was present. One false step and we could fall over the edge of the crater, the sides being too steep and unstable to allow anyone to climb back out without a rope. We gazed in awe for several minutes at the funnel shaped vent of the ash cone before retreating and returning to our pickup. We saw no other person that day and had the mountain to ourselves. That night, I was so exhausted and exhilarated that I could not sleep.

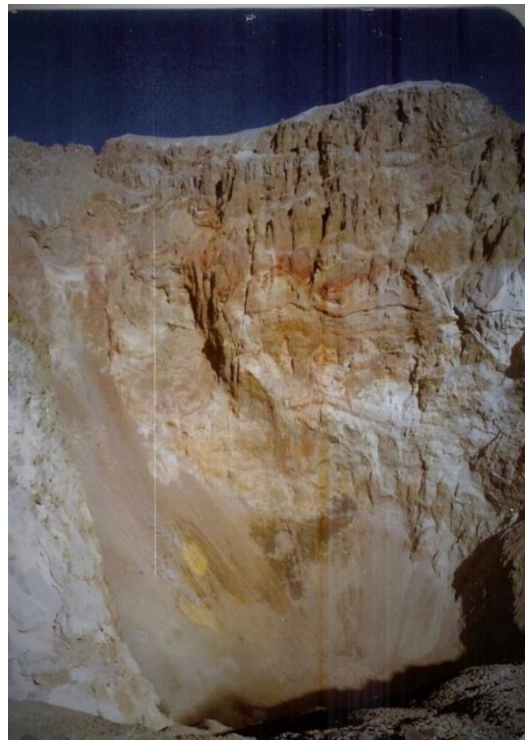

Figure 52 The crater of Ubinas

At the start of the 1930's, Robert Shippee, an American pilot and geologist, met Lt. George Johnson, who after serving in the Great War had become an aerial photographer for the Peruvian Navy. They hatched a plan to explore Peru by air, taking aerial photographs, this being a novel idea at that time. Sponsored by the American and National Geographic Societies and borrowing funds from family and friends, they set out on their exploration of the Andean valleys. They

started in the north with two light aircraft and after losing one in an accident, returned with a single aircraft in 1933 to venture into the southern area of Peru. They had heard about a remote valley to the north of Arequipa and set out by mule to find it. After two and a half days, they encountered the Colca Valley, where they used the "natives" to construct a short gravel runway, enabling the expedition to land the aircraft. The local people mainly spoke Quechua, but the owner of a hostel there spoke Spanish and told Shippee about the history of the people. The ancient (and current) inhabitants were the Collahuas, who had driven out scattered tribes and settled in the Colca Valley, perhaps a thousand years ago. Children had their heads bound, making their skulls tall and conical (a practice stopped by the Spanish) and the tribe were incorporated, through a war and marriage of the daughter of the chief of the Collahuas, to the Inca Emperor and hence, into the Inca Empire about the year 1200. The Spanish Viceroy, Don Francisco de Toledo, visited the valley sometime in the early 1570's and ordered the destruction of numerous hamlets, to be replaced by fourteen small towns, constructed in accordance with the wishes of Philip II of Spain - white painted churches in a plaza with streets laid out in a rectangular manner. The article by Shippee, with aerial photographs by Johnson, in a 1934 edition of National Geographic Magazine, caused a sensation at the time. The article was headed "A FORGOTTEN VALLEY OF PERU – Conquered by Incas, Scourged by Famine, Plagues, and Earthquakes, Colca Valley shelters the Last Fragment of an Ancient Andean Tribe". The "forgotten" valley was then forgotten just as quickly as it had been "found", both by the outside world and successive Peruvian administrations.

The valley remained isolated until well after 1971 when a Peruvian contractor commenced the first and longest tunnel (15 km) for the irrigation scheme. It took until 1977 for the system of graded dirt roads to be completed – in one section in a narrow part of the valley, a tunnel had to be constructed and constant maintenance was required to mend the damage caused by flash floods, earthquakes and landslides. Some of the local men were employed in the construction, being particularly suited to the dangerous tunnelling work. Most of the inhabitants of the valley continued to eke out a precarious existence, farming the drought-affected terraces which had been carved into

each side of the valley. Because the Spanish forced the inhabitants to live in towns some 400 years earlier, the peasant farmers had to walk several kilometres to and from their fields every day. Men laden with scythes and pitchforks, or leading a cow or mule, would walk the tracks early every morning, returning at dusk. Women, too, had to work on the land, many carrying a baby in a pouch on their back. They still wore the hats and clothes of a type which had been photographed by Robert Shippee and which they had no doubt worn for centuries.

To reach the largest MACON camp, which was built near the town of Achoma, it was necessary to take one the graded tracks which passed through some of the most majestic scenery imaginable. Starting above the Arequipa suburb of Cayma, the road passed through a settlement of squatters. The "Indians" as the natives are known, who had been unable to make a living in the Andes, which had been going through a prolonged period of drought, had settled on the outskirts of Arequipa. Initially, they had almost nothing, gradually acquiring concrete blocks to make a small house. Water bowsers would provide water but after a time, when the community had grown sufficiently large, the municipal authority would accept the inevitable and lay on electricity, rudimentary street lighting and refuse collection whilst local entrepreneurs would buy small busses ("micros") to take residents to other parts of the city. Passing through this settlement, I would notice a walled cemetery, with graves outside the walls for those unfortunates who had taken their own lives and were not permitted a burial in consecrated ground. It was said at that time that the true population of Arequipa was approaching a million inhabitants, but the official census only registered under 300,000.[28]

Above the settlement, the track started to climb in a never-ending series of zigzags up the mountain. Termed "The Cabrerias" (the area inhabited by goats), this section of road provided the Swedes with an opportunity to demonstrate their off-road rallying ability, particularly when returning to Arequipa for the weekend. It could be a race to get to the bars in the Plaza de Armas in Arequipa once work stopped on a Friday, and that was undoubtedly the time to avoid

[28] 2013 estimated population figure is just over 900,000 but those in shanty towns on the outskirts do not fill in census forms.

travelling on the road if possible. Once having reached the top of *The Cabrerias*, the relatively flat altiplano stretched out in front.

Figure 53 A herd of vicuña – shot with a telephoto lens, the vicuña being very timid

Figure 54 This was the closest I managed to get to a vicuña – the shot still required a telephoto lens!

In the distance, if one was lucky, could be seen half a dozen vicuña grazing and looking around nervously. These animals, a relative of the llama, were almost hunted to extinction by 1976 and were now a protected species. Their coat, which can only be shorn once every three years, produces an extremely fine wool and in Inca times, this was reserved for Inca royalty. Despite being an endangered species, there were poachers who risked severe penalties in order to kill vicuña for their wool. I was warned to drive away quickly if I ever saw poachers, as I was likely to be "accidentally" shot, thus removing any potential witness who might incriminate them. Vicuña are extremely timid, it being something of a feat to get within fifty metres of one.

Figure 55 A lone vicuña grazes beneath Mt. Chachani mountain

To the right-hand side of the altiplano was the normally invisible side of the snow-capped cone of Misti, the dormant volcano which towers over the city of Arequipa. Straight ahead was a cliff, weathered to produce surreal conical shapes, more fanciful and dramatic than anything painted by Salvador Dali. After crossing the single-track railway line which runs from Arequipa to Puno, I would see the occasional hovel and a pen for alpacas. It was not unusual to come across a small herd of llamas being driven along the road, their ears decorated with bright magenta wool. Violent thunderstorms would sweep in without warning, disappearing just as quickly. I once saw the steaming body of an alpaca at the side of the road, the animal having been struck by lightning and electrocuted less than a minute previously. The road divided, the left-hand fork leading to the Colca valley and the right-hand fork to the open-pit copper mine at Tintaya,

with a spur to the location of the dam which was to be constructed at Condoroma.

After some two and a half hours, my reliable VW Beetle would reach the top of the pass and begin the descent into the Colca Valley. In a few places, it was possible to have a brief glimpse of the valley with its green terraced fields beneath towering mountains. The town of Chivay lay at the entrance to the valley, this being the only place with a petrol station, where one could fill up and have any mechanical or tyre problems attended to. In the plaza, ladies would sit and spin alpaca wool using spindles but there was little time to stop and stare. The camp at Achoma was several kilometres further on, down the valley and I would pass the peasants walking to and from their fields, leaving them in a cloud of dust. I was instructed not to stop and offer them a lift – presumably this could set a precedent, and the construction traffic would be flagged down and diverted from its purpose – but I did feel sorry for the inhabitants, almost none of whom owned vehicles and who had to manage without any public transport.

The Colca Valley is a photographer's paradise. There is the fantastic scenery, the costumes (particularly those of the women) and the wildlife (for example eagles and condors), not to mention the

Figure 56 Women and child walking to the fields from their village in the early morning.

Figure 57 A herd of llamas, decorated by their proud owner. They did not normally carry any heavy loads but can take a light pack.

obligatory photographs of the construction works. Like many other expats, I felt uncomfortable taking pictures of weary peasants trudging to work and toiling in the fields. I tried to take a few pictures surreptitiously, hiding my camera and panning round or taking a "snap" shot. The results were often less than satisfactory, but just now and again, I struck gold. I was particularly proud of an un-posed photograph I took as I peered into a hat shop in Chivay. Taking "posed" photographs was a problem unless one had a Polaroid camera, able to provide near-instant prints. In Jordan, I had taken a shot of a village schoolmaster and his wife in a village near Kerak, and they were most disappointed when they never saw the result. I knew that if I stopped someone or a group of people and asked them to pose for me, they would expect to have a print and that I could not provide.

On one occasion, I spun my camera around to take a picture of a young lady in a beautiful pink dress and white hat, with her baby on her back. She must have noticed me, and I felt both elation and guilt when the prints were developed. If only I could give her a print – I resolved to find her someday. It was different, of course, when everyone dressed up for a carnival. stumbled upon a carnival one weekend, by accident, when visiting Chivay. I was the only expatriate

Figure 58 In a hat shop. Note the young woman is wearing a dress made from a sack.

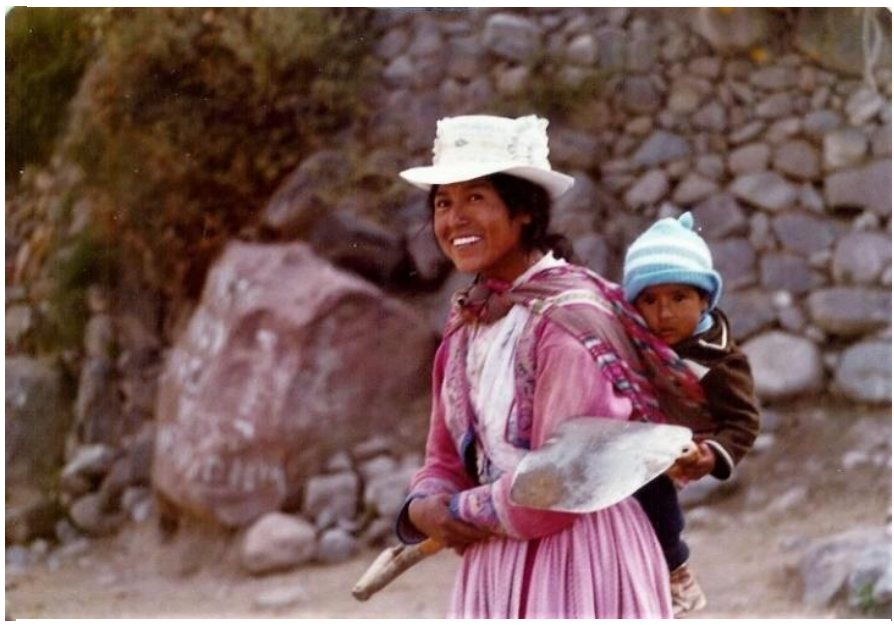

Figure 59 Woman and baby.

there and I felt more than a little conspicuous as the local boys and girls paraded in their fine costumes, but they were quite happy for a

local photographer to take their pictures on this occasion, and I took due advantage.

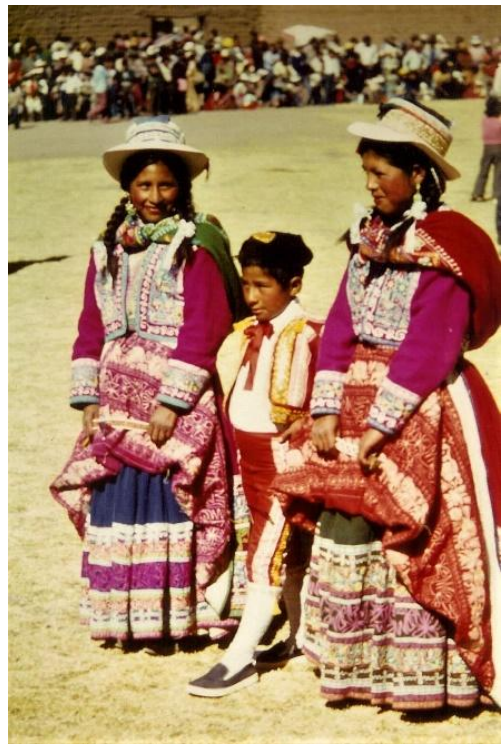

Figure 60 Dressed up to the nines for the carnival in Chivay

The inhabitants of the Colca valley did not benefit much from the irrigation scheme. Many of the workers and nearly all the supplies came from Arequipa. Some of the local men were employed as labourers or in the tunnelling works, but this employment would only last for perhaps three or four years. Apart from the graded roads which made communication between the villages and Arequipa easier, there was little other benefit to the local community. The local facilities were not improved in any way and a significant amount of the river water, which was the lifeblood of the farmers, was about to be diverted from the valley to irrigate the desert far away. One of the MACON doctors, Dr. Snashall, determined to provide a service to some of the inhabitants. He sometimes went for a walk in the more remote areas, taking a pair of dental forceps with him. It is difficult to imagine living in constant pain with toothache and his tooth-extraction services were gratefully accepted. Chewing coca leaves gives teeth a beautiful white appearance until the tooth enamel wears through and the teeth rot.

The first stage of the Majes Project involved the creation of a dam at Condoroma and the diversion of much of the flow of the Colca River into a series of tunnels and canals covering a length of about 118 km, before a further diversion of the flow into the River Vitor. From this river, part of the flow is then extracted into an aqueduct which takes the water to the Majes Plan, an area of flat desert. The land at

Siguas would, on completion of the first phase of the project, be allocated by the Government to those people willing to farm the land, growing many types of fruit and vegetables. It was said by one journalist that, considering the cost of the project, Peru would produce the most expensive peaches in the world!

Having visited the camps at Huambo and Achoma, the one in the desert at Siguas was next on my list. Before leaving Arequipa on the ninety-minute journey, I had been told that the climate was so dry that it only rained once every ten years. Was it an omen that it rained on the day I visited Siguas to see the 35,000ha area of arid pampas which had been set aside for farming? The rain fell as snow on Misti, creating a scenic upper half of the cone. Having completed my visit to Siguas in one day, there was now just one sector still to visit – the dam site at Condoroma, at an elevation of over 4,000m and which required driving over a pass at 4,800m to reach the camp. At that time this was believed to be the highest altitude construction site in the world, other than those small construction works related to the mines in Peru and Bolivia. However, I had no good reason to visit the dam site at that time.

Arequipa was not exactly a hardship posting for an expatriate. The city centre, constructed from the white volcanic stone created by

Figure 61 Spinning wool in the central square, Chivay

an earlier eruption of the Misti volcano, was largely unaltered from the time when it had been built by the Spanish. There, one could find shops selling hand-made leather goods and delicious toffees and chocolates made by a local company. Around the plaza were bars and cafes, the ice-cream parlours populated by giggling girls. A recently opened cinema showed films in English with subtitles in Spanish. New restaurants would appear, some appealing to the "wealthy" expatriates. In the evening, especially at weekends, there were performances by Andean and Criolla folk music bands. There was a golf club, which visitors could use after paying a green fee and the MACON estate had two tennis courts. During the beach season, which starts once the coastal fog clears at the end of December and lasts for three or four months, a popular destination was the small but attractive town of Mollendo, about two and a half hour's drive from Arequipa.

The Pan-American highway runs down the coastal strip of Peru with spurs to Arequipa and the coastal towns of Mollendo and Ilo. If one is so inclined, one can drive from Lima to Arequipa, a distance of just over 1,000km and taking about 16 hours to drive, longer if one decides to break the journey. Some drivers, including those in charge of buses push the limits of endurance, nodding off at the wheel on the long straight pampas (desert plain) sections, leaving the road and overturning or meandering and colliding head-on with another vehicle. Another danger is where the road crosses a river valley. Great ravines form an obstacle at these points which occur every 100 km or so, the road dropping some 1000m (3,300ft) via a long series of bends, the road clinging to the sides of the ravines. Heavily laden and poorly maintained trucks grind their way up and down the long winding ascents and descents where there are very few passing places. Inevitably, other vehicles, including buses, do not wish to sit behind these trucks for twenty or thirty minutes. In undertaking risky overtaking manoeuvres, they often arrive at blind bends with no forward visibility. Driving on this road during the day is bad enough but at night it can be positively suicidal, with no reflective markings or cats' eyes on the road and frequent sudden encounters with dense fog which penetrates the valleys for a distance of several kilometres from the ocean. The fog is created by the air from the cold Humboldt coastal current at the edge of the Pacific Ocean meeting warm desert air and

can be encountered for eight months of the year. Driving to other towns in Southern Peru was therefore challenging and fraught with danger. It was very important to get to one's destination before nightfall. It was the custom for family members to erect crosses or small shrines at the spot where a vehicle had crashed or had plunged into the ravine. The large numbers of monuments resembled a cemetery and provided a "crash barrier" to the bendy road at a site where a particularly traumatic accident had occurred – perhaps 20 or 30 bus passengers had died in the ravine below. This should have served as a warning to fellow drivers, but badly driven, overloaded and poorly maintained vehicles continued to take their toll of human lives.

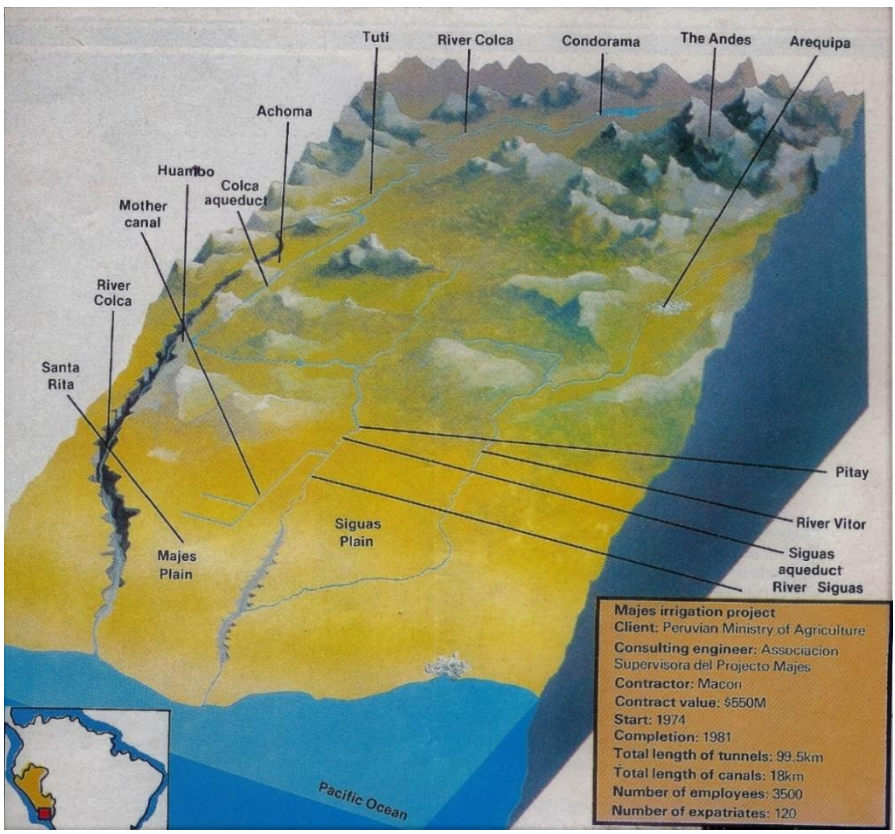

Figure 62 Diagram of the Majes project as produced for the 18 October 1979 edition of New Civil Engineer Magazine. The actual completion date of phase 1 was 1983.

One day, whilst back at the villa in Arequipa, Gerry arrived with his Peruvian girlfriend. She was the assistant to the Welsh no-nonsense office manager, Alan, in the Achoma sector and had returned to Arequipa for the weekend. Her name was Luisa, and I immediately thought "Lucky fellow!", when Gerry introduced her to me. I occasionally accompanied them on outings, getting to know Luisa who spoke English fluently. A few weeks later, Gerry advised me that he was returning to the UK on annual leave for three weeks. He made no secret of the fact that he would be spending some time with his long-time girlfriend, Mandy, back in England.

I decided to keep in touch with Luisa when she returned to Arequipa at the weekends from Achoma, during the period that Gerry was away. As one other expatriate, Mike, said, expecting Luisa to wait for him whilst he had a reunion with his UK girlfriend was perhaps a little optimistic on his part, and I think Gerry realised this on his return when he discovered that Luisa and I had become good friends. It was now up to Luisa to decide who would be her boyfriend and I seemed to be the favoured party. Fair play to Gerry – he accepted the situation and decided instead to seduce the teenage daughter of our boss, Vince. He was successful, leaving Luisa and me to continue seeing each other whilst keeping on good terms with Gerry.

Figure 63 Luisa

The majority of the expatriates were based in one of the four sectors and not at Arequipa, so they had a tougher time than those of us at head office, often coming to Arequipa at the weekends. The more

senior expats were generally very capable and hard-working, having worked on prestigious projects around the world. This was not always the case for the more junior appointments, not that their work ethic could be faulted. Luisa had become somewhat disenchanted when working for a senior manager in Arequipa before her transfer to Achoma. He was a Glaswegian, and Luisa claimed she was almost the only Peruvian who could understand his broad accent. The qualifications of some prospective junior staff were "enhanced" to enable them to pass the Peruvian test as being suitably qualified personnel to be granted a work permit. Luisa's boss justified this manipulation of the qualifications as being necessary so that the quota of expatriates from each of the five contributing countries could be met. Some expatriates arrived with little previous experience of the roles to which they were assigned: a taxi driver from the east end of London became the transport manager in Achoma, warehouse assistants became stores managers and mechanical fitters were promoted to become workshop managers. No doubt, Peruvian men and women could perform many of these roles, but each company wanted to maximise their foreign income from the project. Luisa's scathing comments regarding the qualifications of some of the expats made me a little uncomfortable; whilst I had considerable construction experience, this was not being properly utilised for the benefit of Peru during my current assignment.

Paul, the South African sector manager of British descent at Condoroma, had a reputation. He spoke his mind, did not suffer fools gladly and resented any outside interference. He had criticised the design of the dam which had been produced by the Italian consultants, to the frustration of the MACON senior management, who did not wish to rock the boat. In addition to that indiscretion, Paul was an amateur explorer who used to go hiking in the snow-covered Andes using an ice axe to ascend slippery ledges and ridges, the ice axe also serving as a tool for excavating. On top of one peak, he started to dig and came across some ancient gifts to the gods which he then put in his rucksack, returning triumphantly and boasting about his discovery. Unauthorised archaeological excavations are not allowed in many countries and Peru is no exception, the law requiring severe penalties for anyone responsible. Senior MACON management had to act

quickly and immediately arranged a press conference and a formal handing over of the artefacts to the local museum in Arequipa. Paul somehow escaped arrest and was cautioned as to his future behaviour, but this did nothing to curb his enthusiasm for exploring, or for upsetting anyone he did not respect.

A new young quantity surveyor, Eddie, had arrived from England and was to be posted to the Condoroma site as a cost engineer, running the cost department there. Eddie was both keen and full of himself, determined to follow the best practice which he had learnt in the UK, oblivious of the requirements of project manager Paul in Condoroma. Trouble quickly flared up when Eddie tried to change the way of working there and refused to back down, continuing to insist that the cost department reform the way they did things. After two weeks, Paul had had enough and sent Eddie packing. Vince now had a problem, as the position needed to be filled immediately and it was either Gerry or I who would have to fill that role for two months or so until a permanent replacement could be found. Gerry was on particularly good terms with Vince (who was, perhaps, unaware of the extent of the relationship between his daughter and Gerry) and so I was the one who was selected to go to Condoroma. In a matter of a week, my world had been turned upside down. I set off for Condoroma, wondering how my working relationship with Paul would pan out and giving up any idea of seeing Luisa on a regular basis.

The Condoroma dam site was so remote that many of the expatriates stayed there at the weekends, the journey to Arequipa and back being too arduous. If Luisa stayed at Achoma at the weekend, I might see her occasionally on a Saturday or Sunday – there was little to do at the Condoroma site and I felt I was being sent into exile as I travelled to the camp in the high Andes, wondering how I would get on with leading the Peruvian cost engineers there who spoke no English, my Spanish being still somewhat rudimentary. I drove over the Condoroma pass which reaches a dizzy 4870m above sea level before arriving at the camp, some 4737m in altitude. It was July, winter in the southern hemisphere, when the night-time temperature at that altitude can get as low as minus thirty degrees Celsius. Not realising this, I was unprepared for quite how tough this would be. The first morning, I could barely tolerate the icy cold as I jogged the thirty

metres or so between the hotel building and the “comedor” or dining room, where we had breakfast. The following day, I tried to mitigate the experience of my first day and noticing someone leaving the hotel building first thing in the morning, I asked them to hold the outside door open. I ran down the corridor as fast as I could, emerging from the building at a considerable speed and, after crossing the haul road, crashed through the door of the mess building. It was touch and go crossing the haul road at full pelt, the road usually being fairly quiet at that early hour, giving a reasonable chance of avoiding being run down by a massive haulage dump truck. I now had to get used to working at Condoroma.

Figure 64 Condoroma camp

Figure 65 Fortress-like rock formations with caves, Caylloma province, near Condoroma

I shared a site office with three Peruvian cost engineers, this office being a shipping container with some desks and a fan heater. The first operation each morning was to get the office to an acceptable temperature. It was too cold for the batteries in our calculators to work, and we would stamp our feet, clap our gloved hands and generally try to keep warm for twenty minutes or so until the warmth from the heater was sufficient to allow our calculators to function. Shortly afterwards, we could remove hats and scarves and by about ten o'clock, we could take off our anoraks. At lunchtime, we would have removed our sweaters and after lunch, I would go for a short walk in the sun, rolling up my shirtsleeves. Viscachas, rodents which resemble a cross between a small rabbit and a squirrel, would dart around at speed beneath the rocky cliff where they had their burrows, making the most of the brief interlude, spell of warmth when they could feed. By three o'clock, sweaters would be donned, starting the process of wrapping up for the cold which would shortly arrive.

There was not much to do in the evening – some of the workmen played five a side football on a floodlit paved area. I tried running around the small pitch and collapsed exhausted after less than three circuits. The local men had large chests and lungs which enabled them to play football as they did. The bar was the focal point for the expats - a few were married and stayed in their prefabricated houses but most of us singletons ended up in the bar. One cannot choose one's companions and I had little in common with my fellow expatriates, most of whom were South African. Willy was a supervisor who used to delight in telling disparaging tales about his black workforce in South Africa, who would sometimes accidentally blow themselves up whilst tunnelling. Johan was an Afrikaner who was on a married contract; we rarely saw his wife in the bar although she left her mark by giving Johan a haircut which must have performed using garden shears. His past-time was plundering the archeologically rich caves at nearby Caylloma, taking arrowheads for his extensive collection and this seemed to be the only topic of interest to him.

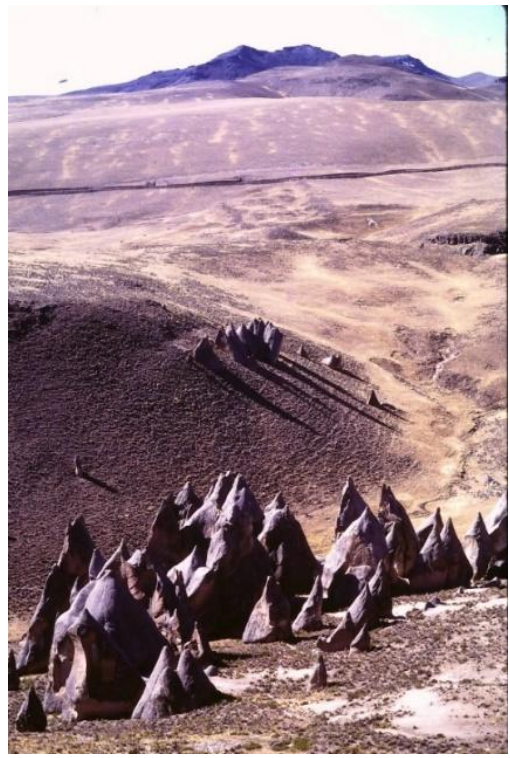

Figure 66 More weird rock formations at Condoroma

There was an elderly Swedish lady doctor who had studied the effects of working at a high altitude and whilst she may have known a great deal about the physiology of working in a rarefied atmosphere, her knowledge of other areas of medicine was a little alarming – some months later when Gerry contracted hepatitis, she recommended that he drink strong coffee to help him recover. The wives of the expats preferred to ask for the Peruvian "doctor" if they were ill, the doctor

for the workforce being a former trainer and medic to a football team based in Lima. The Swedish lady doctor would visit the bar most evenings, waiting for one of us to invite her for another drink. “If you insist, just one more”, she would say on each occasion throughout the evening.

Project manager Paul would sometimes arrive later in the evening and early on during my stay, I mentioned that I had heard about his extensive treks in the Andes, a subject that seemed to be of great pride to him. As time passed during my stay, it became apparent that Paul had accepted my presence and had possibly even warmed to me. However, I was not prepared for the invitation one evening: “I am thinking of descending the Colca Canyon with my son, Mark” he mentioned, his son being in his early twenties and an equally avid explorer. “The canyon is the deepest in the world and we are going to climb Mt. Seprigina (the highest point above the canyon) so that we have properly climbed from one side to the other”. “Very impressive” I thought, but he then followed up by saying, “Would you like to come with us?”. He and his son were fully altitude hardened and fit mountaineers whilst I was normally based at a much lower altitude, had been told I needed knee surgery, had an undiagnosed debilitating condition and was not particularly fit. I should have declined, but the effect of the altitude, a few drinks and a “devil-may-care” attitude somehow allowed me to accept the invitation.

I occasionally travelled back to Arequipa to keep in touch with head office and asked to see the programme for the dam. After a little searching, I found a neat hand-drawn bar-chart on A2 size paper. It had evidently been produced by Chris, the MACON head of planning and I studied it with interest. Chris had great presentation skills and was determined that the programme should fit on one sheet. As the activities progressed across the sheet, it became apparent that the timescale would need to be extended but as this was not possible on the one sheet, the later work activities were placed virtually concurrently, above each other. I laughed at the strange appearance of the compressed bar chart and wondered if I could do a better job.

Figure 67 Condoroma dam at an early stage of construction. The red-brown clay forming an impermeable core is being placed over the exposed bedrock.

In all fairness to Chris, his extensive team had produced a superb set of drawings for every single section of canal and tunnel, which showed at a glance all the salient information and gave a quick assessment of progress. The rate of progress for the canal construction was very predictable, making the production of a detailed schedule unnecessary for each length. Chris may have tried to plan the construction of the many tunnels and quickly given up for it seemed that no two tunnels were the same. Not only was the rock strata very variable, from soft friable banded strata to the hardest igneous rocks, but hidden faults were frequently encountered. These faults would sometimes gush hot water from thermal springs whilst earthquakes and tremors would often dislodge boulders inside the tunnels and close access roads. With these very uncertain tunnelling conditions, predicting the completion date of any particular tunnel was a fool's game but I had an important but secretive task to perform. I had been sent to Peru with the hidden purpose of gathering data to assist with any future tender by Tarmac for tunnelling work in the Andes and I tried to make sense of all these factors in order to arrive at some sort of empirical formula. However, no such excuse could be made for the lack of a detailed schedule for the dam at Condoroma, and although it

was not my responsibility to produce this, I enthusiastically set about the task.

I followed the enormous dump trucks to the site where they were being loaded with rock and clay for the dam and noted the progress, the transit and loading times, then making some calculations. In undertaking this time and motion study, I was able to accurately assess the time needed to complete the various elements of the fill, and in due course I presented Paul with a much more accurate programme for the works. I was a little apprehensive, as he had not asked me to do this work, but he seemed to be genuinely appreciative. After about two months in Condoroma, my replacement had been recruited and I was permitted to leave, enabling me to travel back to Arequipa, expecting to return to my previous life; but changes were afoot.

Luisa had told me one day on my visit to see her in Achoma, that she was going to California for two years to take a course as a paralegal. She would be staying with her oldest sister who lived near San Francisco and as a student, she could not afford to return to Peru before completing the first part of her course the following April. Having found a girlfriend with whom I could relate and share jokes and anecdotes, this was shattering news. A further disappointment was to discover that Beny, our model maid, had decided to leave, being a single parent who wanted to spend some more time with her son and to study so that she could get a better paid job. Her replacement was nowhere near her standard and a let-down for both Gerry and me. Having just recruited our new maid, Gerry and I were told that a third person would be sharing our villa, Per, a Swede, who moved in and promptly hitched up with a young Peruvian girl who spent most of her time in his room. Per thought Gerry and I were most unreasonable when we asked our new maid to do things to a standard which we considered to be acceptable, suggesting that we were racist. To make matters worse, he would eat on the sitting room floor with his girlfriend, leaving half-eaten food on the plates so I would sometimes arrive to find a swarm of ants covering the plates which neither he nor the maid (who did not work at the weekends) had cleared.

The offer by Paul to descend the Colca Canyon provided an opportunity for me to escape from these trials, and I met up with Paul

and his son Mark at the Achoma camp, from where we set off on our expedition. We used Paul's pickup on the hour-long drive to the top of the canyon, a little beyond condor cross where the condors would glide on the thermal currents early every morning. "They harvest cochineal here in Cabanaconde" said Paul, referring to the insects which fed on the prickly pear cactus and when crushed produce a carmine dye.

We looked for the start of the path which descended into the canyon and after about ten minutes managed to locate where it started. The path looked ominously narrow and I was not reassured when Paul mentioned in passing "We will have to hope that we don't meet anyone coming up in the other direction with a mule". There was no way that we could pass anyone with a mule and all we could do would be to turn around and retrace our steps. The village of Tapay on the other side of the canyon was completely cut off from the world, other than by this path and any supplies had to be brought in by mule. The narrow path zig-zagged down the canyon, disappearing from sight as the side of the canyon grew steeper.

Figure 68 Condor cross, with two condors. The cross marks the highest road elevation on the southern flank of the canyon, a favoured place for condors to fly just after sunrise.

Paul was a stickler for detail, so it was not good enough just to descend the canyon. We had to do so at the deepest point and then cross the river at the lowest point and trek to the highest so that he could say that the deepest canyon in the world had been conquered.[29]

[29] At that time, it was believed to be the deepest canyon in the world (excluding some valleys in the Himalayas which are not really canyons but broad valleys). A GPS survey in 2007 showed that a part of the Colca canyon downstream near

This involved starting at 3290m altitude, descending to the canyon floor at 2160m and then climbing to the top of Mt Sepregina at 5432m, returning by the same route.

Figure 69 Descending the canyon. The footpath can be seen zig-zagging down the mountain on the lower right-hand side.

Working out the figures, this meant a descent of 1130 metres, a climb of about 3270 metres, a descent of the same amount and a final climb of 1130 metres, much of the main ascent being in a rarefied atmosphere.[30]. Helicopter rescue was out of the question, as these aircraft cannot hover at an altitude above about 3200m and the downdraughts in the canyon would be perilous. There was no mountain rescue team on standby and any rescue mission, if required, might take days; all these details were not in the forefront of our minds as we set off down the narrow zigzag path, taking care not to trip and fall to our deaths.

Huambo was slightly deeper than at the place we climbed, making this canyon now the second deepest in the world and almost twice the depth of the Grand Canyon (1,857m).

[30] Any climbing above 5,000m (16,400ft) is very hard work owing to the lack of oxygen in the atmosphere.

Figure 70 Suspension bridge over the river Colca at bottom of the canyon.

The prickly pear and aloe vera plants at the start of our journey gave way to sisal, fruit trees and green bushes which thrived in the micro-climate at the base of the canyon. Despite being relatively near to the village of Tapay, we saw no one and skirting the village, we set to work on the main climb, keeping going until the light started to fade. It was time to find a camp site which was just a place on the mountainside which was slightly less steep. We were travelling light and could not bring a tent or copious supplies of food and water, but we were fortunate as0 it did not rain, and after a light cold meal, we bedded down for the night in our sleeping bags, as the sun set. The village of Tapay did not appear to have electricity and we caught the occasional glimpse of a torch or fire in the distance. I had a vision of rolling down the steep mountainside, so I slept lengthways, my head at the high end, hoping that I did not toss and turn in my sleep.

As we set off the following morning, I noted with surprise that there was a relatively well-worn path leading up the mountain. Even today, few mountaineers make the climb to Seprigina and at the time we climbed, there was no record of anyone else in MACON who had made the summit. There could be only one explanation for the path; villagers must regularly ascend the mountain during significant astronomical or weather events to pay homage to the mountain spirits, or deity, a practice which dates from at least Inca times. There was no such auspicious event during our time on the mountain and we did not see another soul throughout our entire three-day expedition. Above 4,000m, the climb started to get tougher, and I started to struggle, managing with some difficulty to keep up with Paul and Mark until we reached the top of the main climb at about 5,000m. It was here that we could see what appeared to be the roof of the world, the snow-capped Andean peaks visible in all directions, with Seprigina another 400m or so further above us. The sky, was turning blacker by the minute, becoming so dark that we could barely see more than about fifty metres ahead.

Figure 71 Paul (leading) and son Mark walking along the path near Tapay.

One can measure the distance of a thunderstorm by noting the time between a flash of lightning and the resultant clap of thunder and when the storm arrived, it did so with a vengeance, hail hammering down, and the flashes of fork lightning seemingly followed by near instantaneous claps of thunder. Lightning strikes on humans are not always fatal but survivors often suffer life-changing injuries and depend upon prompt medical attention. High up in the Andes and days away from any rescue, I suspected that any lightning strike would be as good as fatal. I crouched behind a large boulder, trying to make my backpack inconspicuous, half expecting to be struck every time there was a flash. The three of us remained in a crouching position for a few minutes, then Paul and Mark, perhaps tiring of the battering they were receiving from the hailstorm, set off for the summit. I considered that the lightning was still far too close for comfort, and I stayed a little longer before setting off. Paul and Mark were now out of sight in the gloomy conditions, and I struggled on, the lack of oxygen only allowing me to take a short series of three steps before stopping, panting and gulping air. It was each man for himself – Paul had no intention of allowing me to prevent him from achieving his goal.

Figure 72 View form Mt Sepregina. The snow-covered peaks of the Andes spread out in all directions.

As I approached the summit, I could just make out the distant forms of Paul and Mark who were now descending but I pressed on and finally made the peak, more relieved to be still alive than with any real elation. I now had to find Paul and Mark and I ran down the mountain for several hundred metres until I caught up with them. That night, we repeated the procedure of sleeping on the mountain, at roughly the same place as before and returned, as planned, in the afternoon of the third day. Arriving back at our pick-up truck tired but elated, I suddenly thought about my knees and realised that they were fine – without any operations or medication (not even a pain reliever), both my knees had stood up to perhaps the most severe challenge possible.

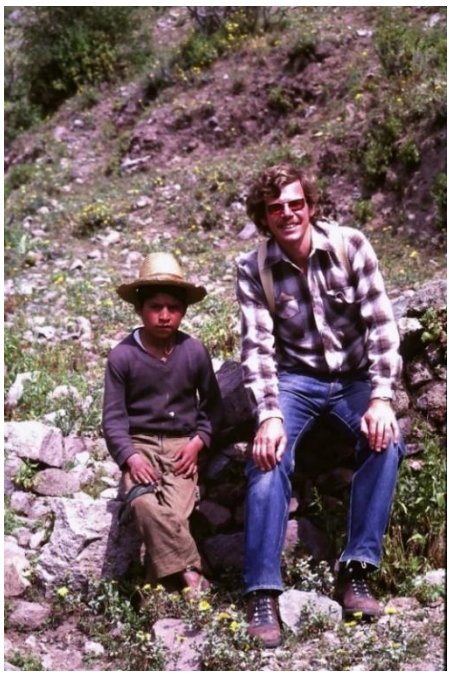

Figure 73 A boy who was keen to be photographed with me in the Colca valley

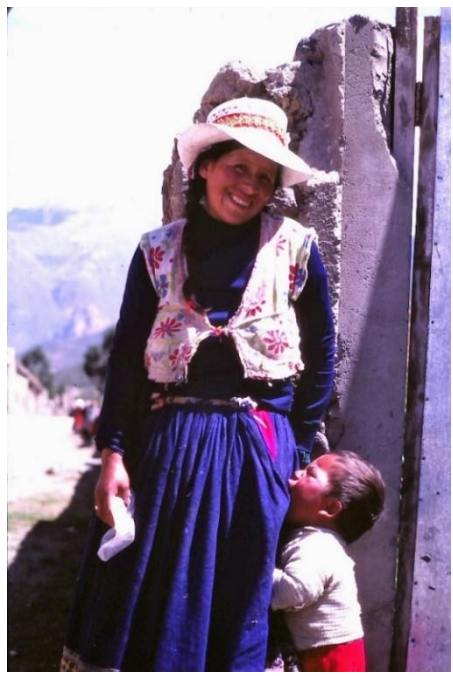

Figure 74 This little boy was less keen to be photographed!

Back in Arequipa, I was keen to get out of the villa and away from Per and his girlfriend in the evenings, and an unexpected opportunity arose. Fellow expat Robert was a fit and lean Scot who looked as if he had been in the army. He approached me one day. “Fancy joining three of us in taking a self-defence course?” he enquired. “Sure” I replied,

thinking that this might give me more confidence walking along some of the narrow back streets in Arequipa at night. One of our number had been attacked and robbed in such circumstances. It then transpired that the other two members of our group were a short-tempered and well-built accountant called Mike and a Portuguese guy called Alfonso who had been in the Mozambican army fighting FRELIMO guerrilla "freedom fighters". I was a little concerned about the physical stature and aggressiveness of my companions and my concerns were certainly not alleviated when our trainer arrived late, explaining that he had to call in at the doctor for his regular pain-relieving injections. Only then did I discover that he was the reigning South American karate champion. He told us he would combine karate and self-defence, and it quickly became evident that he did not believe in giving us a soft time. He would arrange a series of five or six wooden chairs in a line, a short space between each one, demanding that we jump over them in our bare feet. One poor take-off or stumble and we would have crashed to the wooden floor with a broken toe, foot or arm. He would, on occasions, take off his belt and whirl it round at constantly changing different heights; if low, we had to jump over the belt and if high, duck and if we made just one mistake in assessing the height, it would be very painful.

On one occasion, our instructor taunted Mike with a series of flicks to his face, which enraged the short-tempered Mike who exploded, using his considerable weight to attack our trainer who managed to extricate himself and bring Mike crashing to the ground after which both parties were a little more cautious from then on. One benefit of this training was that it greatly improved my reaction times, which I was able to demonstrate at the net on the tennis court when playing doubles matches. I left the course having learnt how to disarm a man wielding a knife, leaving the assailant with a broken arm and a broken leg! Fortunately, I have never had to put into practice that part of my training.

Bjorn, one of the Swedes based in Achoma, had rented a shared house in a suburb of Arequipa and I sometimes visited him and the other guests at the weekend. On one occasion, I did something which was very untypical of me – I gate-crashed a party! A girl friend of the girl Bjorn was dating had a birthday and was holding a party at

her parent's house. Bjorn couldn't make it and suggested I might like to go. I found the address and entered as if I had been invited, resulting in some puzzled looks from the birthday girl. I noticed that there were only a few other young men, most of the guests being girls and as might be expected in South America, it was not long before music was played and the dancing began, although some of the other men seemed reluctant to move from their chairs. I didn't manage to sit down for the rest of the evening as I swapped partners and danced with each of the girls and when I finally left, the birthday girl's mother thanked me profusely for coming!

At weekends, I would sometimes visit the golf club on the other side of the city, where I would hack my way around the course. After several visits, I found out that a new club secretary of the golf club was appointed and bumping into him on one of my visits, discovered he was a fellow Briton also called Brian. Having recently divorced, he was looking to start life afresh in a new country and being a fluent Spanish speaker, had somehow chosen Arequipa. It was good to find someone unconnected with MACON with whom I could converse, so we became friends. I also made friends with Bob, a Canadian of Hungarian extraction who worked in the stores in Huambo and we resolved to go on some expeditions together. My life in Peru was almost back on track after my confinement in Condoroma; I was just missing my girlfriend, Luisa, and we kept in touch with regular correspondence.

* *

Because of the cost of airfares, the Tarmac contract only granted expats one home leave of two weeks every year. We were, however, allowed additional local leave every four months or so. For my first local leave, I had visited Cuzco, the nearby sacred valley and Machu Picchu. Virtually every tourist who visits Peru heads to these places and it was only natural that I felt obliged to follow the crowd. I was very impressed with the Inca stonework in the sites near the sacred valley and the magnificent setting of Machu Picchu in a bend in the river in front of a towering mountain peak. The site was reached by zigzagging back and forth by train, enabling it to climb the mountain shortly after leaving Cuzco.

For my second local trip at the end of July, I needed to get away from Condoroma and decided to go somewhere which did not involve the high Andes. Many people may be surprised to learn that most Peruvians at that time had never visited the isolated jungle, this area comprising a large part of the country. I had been inoculated against yellow fever before leaving the UK and wished to see the rain forest but found that the only notable Peruvian jungle city is Iquitos in the north, some 1400 km from Arequipa with no access roads, requiring a change of flights in Lima. I was, however, in luck as I learnt that flights to the small jungle town of Puerto Maldonado had just commenced, the town being located on the River Madre de Dios on the other side of the Andes from Arequipa. I booked a package tour there and although I did not know it at the time, I was one of the early pioneers of what was to later be known as “eco-tourism”. The concrete runway at Puerto Maldonado had just been constructed but the terminal building had yet to be built and departing passengers had to check-in inside a tent, reinforced with a few corrugated sheets, the check-in operation consisting of a desk with a weighing machine of the type which used to be provided by department stores to weigh people. On arrival, I waited on the runway with the other passengers for a bus to take us along a rough unpaved road to the Plaza de Armas in the town.

Figure 75 Passengers waiting on the runway at Puerto Maldonado to board an aircraft - our departure lounge!

I discovered that the economy of Puerto Maldonado was based on logging, boat building, panning for gold and collecting Brazil nuts. Logging was unsustainable in the long term and panning for gold was arduous work for little reward, as was demonstrated to us by a tourist guide. There were no paved roads in the vicinity and the river was the main means of access although Peru's President Belaunde harboured aspirations of opening up the jungle for trade and tourism and was keen to build connecting roads and airports, an ambition largely thwarted by the poor economy at that time. Our small party took a boat called a "peque peque" (named after the sound of a chugging outboard motor) along the river for two or three hours until we reached our camp consisting of some wooden huts on stilts, each containing a bed protected with a mosquito net. Anyone who has visited the jungle will know that birds and animals are difficult to spot, being heard rather than seen. At the camp, some of the wild animals had become accustomed to sharing their space with humans, fruit being used to entice them close. A tapir and a coati (a South American racoon) were to be seen foraging, along with assorted parrots and a toucan and for two days, it was as if I was in a completely different world to the one I had just come from.

Figure 76 A gold panning operation

Figure 77 Two birds who came to visit the camp

Figure 78 A coati (a member of the racoon family)

It was one year after first arriving in Peru, so I was entitled to return to the UK for two weeks for my annual leave. Mid November was not the best time of the year to go home to the UK, on account of the adverse weather and short days, so I welcomed the opportunity to go instead to Sarasota, Florida where my parents had rented an apartment for a winter break. I arrived in Florida on 12th November 1981, expecting to have a leisurely break before returning to Peru for the second year of my contract.

The second Columbia space shuttle launch had been dogged with problems. Set for October 9th, it was then rescheduled for November 4th when a further glitch was encountered causing a further delay to November 12th when last minute issues delayed the launch once again by nearly three hours. I had arrived at Miami airport and was now driving across the Everglades swamp in my hire car, listening to the radio. When I heard that the launch was imminent, I stopped the car in a layby with a few other travellers and stood gazing towards Cape Canaveral (then called Cape Kennedy). The enormous rocket which propelled the space shuttle was clearly visible as it lifted off the launch pad and slowly disappeared into the clouds. Space exploration was a risky business, but then, as the saying goes, “nothing ventured, nothing gained”. With that thought in the back of my mind, I continued my journey to Sarasota.

Figure 79A The launch of Columbia (NASA)

Figure 79 B Alpaca grazing

10. Expect the unexpected

You won't see your future in a crystal ball
Psychic friends can't help you at all
Can't buy time at a shopping mall
The writing's on the wall
Struck by lightning, fall in a well
It sounds far-fetched but you never can tell
When you swim with sharks that you can't repel
No one can hear your yell

"Expect the unexpected" by Dog Eat Dog

I could now look forward to a relaxing two weeks in Sarasota with my parents and my brother Chris, who I had not seen since my earlier trip to New Zealand. After a couple of days, I had to make a telephone call; I had corresponded regularly with Luisa since her departure for the USA and she had asked me to post a parcel to her (in San Francisco), from her parents in Peru, when I reached America - postage costs and possible theft made postage directly from Peru somewhat uncertain. I therefore called her, confirming that I was now in the USA and could post the parcel. "How about my boyfriend coming to see me?" she asked. A little taken aback, I thought about this request overnight, deciding that it was indeed possible to fly the width of the United States and spend a week in San Francisco.

Luisa was booked on her paralegal course until April of the following year and was attending classes during some weekdays, so I found myself with some free time in the San Francisco Bay area. The day after arriving in San Francisco, I wandered down to the Embarcadero and North Beach area of the city, where many piers protrude into the bay. Some of these are reserved for fishing boats and fish markets, whilst others such as those at Fisherman's Wharf, have visitor attractions and at that time, a colony of noisy sea-lions. I was

looking for some direction – was my friendship with Luisa a brief romance or something more?

Figure 80 San Francisco pier

I have never believed in those horoscopes published in the tabloid newspapers; the notion that one twelfth of the world's population can have the same meaningful advice based on a birth month seems ridiculous. The Chinese take astrology much more seriously, the year and time of birth being included as guidance in a complex chart, as well as other factors. Using the zodiac, it is claimed that matches in compatibility can be established. Well, it couldn't do any harm could it? I had time to kill and passed a hut which advertised the services of a Chinese astrologist. I paused, unsure as to whether this was a good idea, then plucking up courage, I entered. My lady astrologist informed me that I had to make a big decision in my life and that I should be positive. I was further told, that as a tiger, I was most compatible with those who are a pig, horse or dragon. Luisa was a horse. If I was looking for a sign, I had one. San Francisco was a city noted as a destination for those who admire "Peace, Love, Freedom and Adventure". To clinch it, the power ballad by Foreigner "Waiting

for a girl like you" was being played on the radio at that time, the song being a favourite of Luisa.

I proposed in Golden Gate park. "But it is always raining in England!" replied Luisa. Indeed, the British climate is not as benign as in Arequipa or San Francisco, but at least the UK does not have major earthquakes. Luisa needed to complete her course and so I returned to Peru on my own, having to wait four months until she could arrive in April, thus confirming, at that time, that she had not changed her mind, perhaps deciding instead to stay in America.

My Hungarian-Canadian friend, Bob who worked at the Huambo site and liked a bit of adventure and exploration, provided me with a companion on some outings. Paul, the South African project manager from Condoroma was keen to undertake further climbs with his son, Mark, and invited me along. I requested that Bob be included as well and it was then that I learned that on his next expedition, we would need ice-axes, which Paul was able to supply. We would be climbing along icy snow-covered ridges, enabling us to reach the peak of this particular mountain. Our expedition was successful, enabling us all to return unharmed, having reached the icy peak with the aid of the ice-axes.

Figure 81. Climbing Andean peaks L to R. Mark, author, Paul, Bob (unknown).

We did not excavate at the top of the mountain – Paul had no doubt learnt his lesson. However, there was always the temptation to excavate the mounds situated outside small Andean settlements. These would typically have shards of pottery and llama bones; were these human graves as well? Could treasure be buried here? If the locals caught anyone digging, they would become agitated and drive away the pilferers. I dug around with Bob one day, on the surface of one such mound but after just a few shovels, I became uneasy and decided not to excavate further. Bob went on an expedition with another group a little later when they were intercepted by angry villagers who tried to prevent them excavating. Bob decided at that point that he would forego further digging, although some of the group seemed determined to continue for a while, nothing of note being uncovered, except by Bob, who discovered by chance where gold had been hidden. He kept quiet and never told anyone except me, after swearing me to silence. The gold does not belong to plunderers and should stay where it belongs so, the secret of the hidden gold remains with us, a secret we will take to our graves.

Figure 82 View across the Colca valley near Achoma. The volcano Mismi, source of the Amazon, in the distance. The fields are extensively terraced.

From time to time, the occasional tourist would ask to visit the Colca Valley during their stay in Arequipa, inevitably being told that we could not accommodate visitors to the works, as this would be too time consuming for our staff. However, one visitor to Arequipa decided to write in advance of his visit; he was a young Liverpudlian magistrate who was teaching at a college in Liverpool, and he asked if he could visit the irrigation scheme during his visit to Peru. The letter was addressed to the head of the MACON consortium who passed it on to Vince. Vince was impressed; unlike most curious visitors, this guy had actually bothered to write a letter in advance and seemed genuinely interested in the project. “Are you free tomorrow?” asked Vince, adding “I can give you the day off!”. “Sure” I replied, “but which sector should I take him to?” “I will leave that up to you” remarked Vince. Being presented with this unique opportunity, I decided to make the most of the situation. “I will take him on a grand tour” I announced. To my knowledge, this had never been attempted before and has probably not been attempted since. I would start in Arequipa, go to the dam site at Condoroma, visit the intake at Tuti, descend the Colca Valley as far as Huambo and then take a little used road via the “Valley of the Volcanoes” with its numerous lava plumes, leading to the pampas at Siguas, returning via the Pan American highway. I calculated that if we started at an early hour, we could do the entire trip before sunset, stopping for lunch at Achoma. I gave the magistrate the tour of a lifetime, for which he was extremely grateful, unable to believe his luck.

* *

I would sometimes listen to the BBC world service, enabling me to keep in touch with world news. When the newsreader announced on 19th March that some Argentine scrap metal workers had landed on a remote British Antarctic island called South Georgia and raised the Argentine flag, I dismissed the event as bravado and thought little more about it. Unfortunately, as it turned out, it appeared that the Foreign Office of the British Government took the same view. I had heard about the military junta from an Argentinian who worked for MACON. They clamped down on any dissent, throwing young men who were deemed to be “troublemakers” into the ocean from

helicopters. This Argentinian told us that one of his friends had been diving near the Argentine coast and had come across weighted-down bodies chained together.[31] This brutal regime was becoming very unpopular, not only because of the repression and arrests without trial, but also because of the economy.

General Galtieri and his junta needed something to unite the country and for military leaders, that usually means a war. Argentina had a border dispute with Chile, but that country would be a formidable opponent. Meanwhile, Britain had decided to withdraw its only ship in the region, HMS Endurance, as part of defence cuts imposed by Margaret Thatcher, leaving the Falkland Islands completely unprotected. Argentina had long claimed that "The Malvinas" belonged to them and although previously thought to be of little commercial value, it was now believed that oil might be found within the territorial waters of those islands. In hindsight, it does not seem surprising that Argentina mounted an invasion on 2nd April, a few days before Luisa arrived back in Peru. Peru had old border disputes with Chile along with current ones with Ecuador, so these two countries were not popular and certainly not Peruvian allies. On the other hand, many Peruvians went to university in Argentina or had Argentinian relatives, regarding that country as "friendly". They were also keen to promote South American unity and complete independence of the South American continent from any imperialist European countries. It was hardly surprising that many young Peruvians ignored the terrible human rights record of the Argentinian junta and offered to go and fight with the Argentine forces, having no idea that the Falkland Islands were only populated by a small number of sheep farmers of British descent; they probably wanted some adventure just like those young men in Australia who volunteered for the first world war, like my grandfather, finding themselves sent to Gallipoli.

Back in the UK, Margaret Thatcher was deeply unpopular, the economy being in a poor state in 1982, and she was on course to lose the next general election in June 1983 unless things improved

[31] The "Dirty War" in Argentina was conducted by right-wing death squads between 1974-83. About 30,000 people disappeared, many of them students, trade unionists, artists, writers and journalists, never to be seen again.

radically. Needing something to unite the country behind her, the unfolding events proved to be a godsend and with seemingly little hesitation, she ordered a taskforce to set sail with less than three days' notice. I could imagine the heavy plate shop in Portsmouth dockyard, which I had helped to build, being a hive of activity as ships were modified and made ready for war. More than one hundred ships set sail, including some merchant ships which had been commandeered to bring supplies and equipment. In just over three weeks, the task force would arrive in the Falklands and battle would commence.

It was in this climate that Luisa and I had to try and obtain the permit to get married in Peru. It was a lengthy and bureaucratic process at the best of times. Although some of my documents could be verified by the British consulate in Arequipa, most of the paperwork had to be dealt with in Lima. As in many developing countries, the process required documents passing between large numbers of clerks in different Government departments. In normal times, it might take three to four months to obtain a marriage license but with public sentiment as it was, it only needed one of the many clerks to "lose" or "misfile" the documents and our application could be delayed indefinitely. Luisa and I explained to our lawyer that getting the requisite permit would be extremely difficult. He nodded, clearly in agreement with our assessment of the situation. "Can anything be done?" requested Luisa; the lawyer looked pensive, then responded, "I will see what I can do".

Information about the conflict was to come from three sources: Peruvian newspapers, the BBC world service and Chilean radio. Chris, the planning engineer based in Achoma, was fluent in Spanish and listened in to Chilean news broadcasts. At times, it was as if we were listening to, or reading about, news of different events. South Georgia, a Falkland Island dependency, was quickly recaptured by the Royal Marines on 25th April and the main fighting commenced on 1st May. The British bombed the airfield at Port Stanley and the Argentine air force attacked the task force. So far, there had been no major loss of life and at this stage President Belaunde Terry of Peru announced that he had a peace plan. This made headlines in the Peruvian newspapers and was reported by Chilean radio, whereas the BBC world service did not mention it. Both sides accepted the peace

plan in principle, although both objected to some of the detail which involved a variety of nations administering the islands, pending a peaceful resolution. The British minister involved in the discussions kept the details secret, fearing that if his backbench colleagues were to hear of it, they would object, claiming that Britain had capitulated. The British Parliament was thus denied information on the Peruvian peace plan and the BBC kept quiet. Everything was to change one day later.

The Argentine light cruiser, General Belgrano, had survived the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour (when it was named USS Phoenix) and was now armed with Sea Cat anti-aircraft missiles. Britain had declared a maritime exclusion zone of 200 nautical miles around the Falklands and finding the Belgrano within this zone, the nuclear-powered submarine Conqueror fired three torpedoes at the Belgrano, two of which hit the ship and exploded, causing the ship to sink quickly with the loss of 323 Argentinian sailors. This action had a number of consequences; firstly, the remaining Argentinian warships sailed back to port, never to return during the conflict and secondly, General Galtieri changed his position on the proposed Peruvian peace treaty, the head of the Argentine navy believing that dastardly act had to be avenged. The act of sinking the Belgrano proved highly controversial, not only in South America but also in Britain with the British prime minister being accused of authorising an attack on a ship which was not an active threat to the task force.[32] In Peru, not only was this action perceived as a crime but also as a breach of the anti-nuclear rules. There was some confusion in the minds of many, as to the status of a "nuclear powered" vessel as opposed to a "nuclear armed" vessel. Many of the general public in Peru seemed to believe that HMS Conqueror carried nuclear weapons. It did not, but if sunk or damaged, it could have caused radioactive contamination.

Things were hotting up. The Argentine air force responded on 4th May, firing a missile which sank HMS Sheffield with the loss of

[32] Recent clarification has come from a senior officer in the Argentine Navy who has asserted that the ship was, in fact, heading for a rendezvous point, not an Argentine port, and was intending to engage with the British task force. Despite this assertion, Argentina's president has claimed that the sinking was a "War Crime".

twenty crew. Despite the absence of the Argentine navy in further fighting, their air force was well equipped with some of the latest military hardware including Exocet missiles and the Argentine ground forces had sophisticated anti-aircraft guns. It looked as if it would be a question of who would run out of supplies and aircraft first. Attacking the British ships, the Argentine air force was suffering a larger number of casualties than the British with their Sea Harriers which were slower but more manoeuvrable at low speed. It was evident that in a protracted war, Argentina would be victorious, simply because it had far more aircraft and troops in reserve, so the British forces desperately needed to curtail the activity of the Argentine air force. The RAF had bombed Port Stanley runway, but the Argentine bombs and missiles were now being launched by aircraft coming from bases on the mainland of Argentina. Britain had not formally declared war on Argentina, but if they attacked a base on the mainland, that was as good as a declaration of war. The British politicians mulled over this possibility, knowing that this course of action might cause other countries to be engaged.

The British expats were now virtually "persona non grata" in Peru. If Britain attacked a mainland base, Argentina might well call upon Peru to assist.[33] In this event, we might be immediately deported, interned in a camp, or worse still, sent to an already overcrowded Peruvian jail, where we might be tortured by other inmates who were seeking revenge. I went into one shop and the shopkeeper asked me where I was from. Without thinking, I responded "Inglaterra". The shopkeeper literally jumped backwards, pointing at me and hissing, "The enemy!". I did not make that mistake again.

From May 19th to 25th, there were a series of setbacks for the British forces. A British helicopter ditched in the sea killing 22 men, the ships Ardent, Antelope and Coventry were sunk and to cap it off, the main supply ship with the large troop carrying and heavy lifting helicopters on board, the Atlantic Conveyor, was also sunk. We heard

[33] British SAS forces did in fact enter Argentina from Chile to attack an Argentine base but withdrew when the operation was considered to be too risky. Peru, a strong supporter of Argentina's claim to the "Malvinas" islands sourced and provided missiles, ammunition and 10 Mirage fighter aircraft which flew from Arequipa to Argentina to replace aircraft lost in the conflict.

about these losses from Chilean radio, one day before they were confirmed by the BBC. At about this time, our lawyer contacted us, requesting that we visit him. To our amazement, he had our marriage permit; he had certainly managed to "pull a few strings". We now needed to act fast, before the situation deteriorated. A few days later, the battle of Goose Green took place, the British being the victors after two days of fighting and the loss of their commander.

The only recognized weddings in Peru are civil weddings. This may seem strange for a country where the Catholic church exerts a great deal of influence – perhaps the reason for this requirement is to limit the authority of that religious organisation. Many couples who wish to have a church wedding accommodate this regulation by arranging for the civil registrar to attend a room in the church immediately after the religious wedding, thus combining the wedding ceremonies. However, we were unable to arrange this in the church of Luisa's choice at short notice, so we arranged to have two separate ceremonies on the same day, 10th June.

On June 8th, there was a further disaster for British forces. Two Royal Fleet Auxiliary landing craft were attacked, one being sunk, with over 50 deaths and many injuries, some crew and soldiers suffering horrific burns. Newspaper pictures and TV footage showed survivors rowing for the shore, whilst their ships were in flames. The war was dragging on and by now, Britain had lost six ships, many more were damaged, almost no heavy lift helicopters were available, and supplies were dwindling. Argentina was trying to obtain more Exocet missiles, either from France (the manufacturer), Israel or Peru. It was against this backdrop that Luisa and I were married.

My boss, Vince, acted as a witness at the civil wedding at ten o'clock in the morning. My friend, Brian, from the golf club, was best man at the church wedding which took place shortly after midday. Luisa was delayed as her "beauty treatment" was applied too heavily and when she saw the result, she demanded that the make-up be removed and reapplied. "You've been jilted" joked my best man after about ten minutes of waiting in the church. "Good job I am already married" I retorted.

Figure 83 Wedding reception in La Mansion del Fundador

Arequipa's founder, Garcí Manuel de Carbaja, built a mansion on a country estate twenty kilometres from Arequipa in the 1540's. As with all the buildings in Arequipa at that time, it was built using the local white ashlar stone, a product of lava from a previous volcanic eruption from mount Misti. After a few centuries, the building became dilapidated, until 1981, when it was purchased and restored by a group who were passionate about Arequipa's heritage. The colonial style rooms and vaults were fitted out as a museum with artwork, artefacts and antique furniture, making this a very fine place to hold our wedding reception.

We decided to have our main honeymoon later in the year and spent a few days at a hotel in Moquegua, southern Peru, before returning to Arequipa and moving into our two-storey house which MACON had allocated to us. Meanwhile, the Falklands conflict was reaching its bloody conclusion. Britain needed to end the war quickly, as the southern hemisphere winter closed in, severely restricting troop movements on the ground. Argentina had more aircraft and military

supplies than Britain and these were being replenished; Peru was sending aircraft and other supplies and was secretly trying to obtain more Exocet missiles for Argentina to use. The United Nations was trying to broker a ceasefire, which was unacceptable to the UK. France, although remaining neutral and mildly supportive of Britain, had sent technicians to Argentina to advise on operating its Exocet missiles. It was now time for the Royal Marines to show what they could do, salvaging the desperate situation for the British forces. In freezing temperatures and carrying 130lb (59kg) packs and weapons, they "yomped" for 90 km over boggy hillocky terrain, taking three days to reach three Argentine positions which were heavily defended and protected by mines. At Mount Longdon, the fighting was particularly prolonged and fierce, ending with close quarter fighting using bayonets. Argentina fired a land based Exocet missile during this time, badly damaging the destroyer HMS Glamorgan. Another Exocet missile was fired but failed to find the aircraft carrier HMS Invincible.

As we returned to Arequipa from Moquegua, the Guards and Gurkhas were attacking the Argentine positions defending Port Stanley in a final push and shortly afterwards, the war was over. It had been a nail-biting time for those who cared about the outcome. 1,800 traders and sheep farmers who lived on the Falkland Islands had been "liberated" at a cost of 907 deaths (combined total), approximately 2,000 non-fatal casualties, some suffering life-changing injuries, and with countless other unrecorded cases of mental trauma. The local inhabitants now had to share their islands with large numbers of troops and air force personnel for the foreseeable future. The real winner was, perhaps, the British PM, whose popularity surged and who was able to secure a second term of office the following year. At least the defeat precipitated the downfall of the brutal Argentinian junta the following year.

One of our next-door neighbours in our newly allocated house in Arequipa was a guy called Robert who was married to a Venezuelan lady. He was living on his own, awaiting her arrival from Venezuela a few weeks later. When that date arrived, he set off to Lima to meet her at the airport. She was travelling with the family pet, a Jack Russell

terrier. What neither she, nor Robert, had realised was that although she was coming from a South American country, she needed a visa to enter Peru. She was denied entry, although the pet was allowed to enter! Robert returned with the Jack Russell terrier, to be teased mercilessly by the other British expats as “the man who went to collect a wife and came back with a dog”.

Figure 84 Mt Chachani (6057m) towers over the MACON housing estate.

Having moved into our new house, Luisa decided to prepare one of Arequipa’s most famous dishes: rocoto relleno. This is a Peruvian variety of stuffed peppers, and the finished dish is delicious, provided one does not try to drink it with a glass of beer which will then set one’s mouth on fire. The Peruvian rocoto is more than ten times spicier than the jalapeño chili pepper, having to be boiled multiple times to make it edible. During the boiling process, the rocotos give off a pungent peppery choking vapour that pervades the kitchen. The top of the pepper is cut off and the shell is filled with minced meat and topped with cheese before the top is replaced. It is best accompanied with chicha, a maize drink which can be fermented to make it alcoholic, but is often served unfermented using purple

corn, the refreshing drink having the appearance of Ribena. I was thus introduced to the delights of Arequipeña cooking which also included camarones, which are freshwater prawns from local streams, corvina, a tasty Pacific Ocean fish and cerviche which is fresh raw fish which is "cooked" by being marinated in lemon juice. This can be washed down with chicha or "Cerveza Arequipeña" which is the locally brewed lager beer.

It was difficult to ignore El Misti, the cone shaped snow-capped volcano which towers above the city. It is well known that Naples (Napoli) is threatened by a potential eruption of Mt. Vesuvius which could lead to mass destruction, as happened at nearby Pompeii. Arequipa is in a similar situation, with El Misti being dormant, the last significant ash eruption being in the 15th century before Arequipa was founded and the last major explosive eruption being about 310 BC. Should the volcano awaken, Arequipa would be threatened by a torrent of ash or a Pompeii-style pyroclastic flow, or possibly even an avalanche, should an earthquake cause the volcano's wall to collapse. But for now, El Misti emits only small quantities of gas and steam, with occasional new fumaroles being created. The local population just get on with their lives, ignoring the peril which could strike at a time somewhere between the next month and one thousand years – who knows? Few locals are inclined to climb the mountain, but those who do often leave small offerings at the summit, following ancient traditions. One young European lady ventured up the mountain alone and was never seen again until one year later, her remains being discovered about halfway up. Had she been robbed and murdered or broken an ankle and starved to death? I never found out, but it was certainly not advisable to attempt mountaineering on one's own. Earlier, a party from MACON had climbed the mountain and as they neared the top, were astonished to see a lone middle-aged Peruvian lady descending. "What are you doing up here?" they asked her in Spanish. "I had a dream" she told them, "God told me that I must climb Misti, so here I am!" She continued on her way, hopefully finding the experience had helped her with her problems.

My friend Bob wanted to climb Misti and persuaded me to go with him, requiring me to buy a second-hand sleeping bag for the expedition, while Bob borrowed a two-man tent. The plan was to drive in a four-wheel drive vehicle up to the Salinas y Aguada Blanca national vicuña reserve above Arequipa, then to leave the track and head towards the shoulder where the mountain slope steepens at about 4,000 metres. This would leave us a further 1,800 metres to climb, the slope being mostly sandy gravel and quite steep, but not requiring any specialist equipment or expertise. We reckoned that if we camped overnight, we would reach the summit in about 7 or 8 hours, leaving us three hours to return before dusk. We would climb with light rucksacks, leaving the tent, sleeping bags and some provisions with the pickup, hoping that no-one would find the vehicle and steal anything before we made our return.

I had not anticipated how cold the temperature could reach at night, finding my boots frozen as we awoke at dawn. After a quick breakfast, packing up the tent and finally getting on my boots after twenty minutes of effort, we started the ascent. All was going to plan until we were within about two hundred metres of the summit. At this point, the going was tough because of the altitude and cold wind, and I noticed that Bob was shaking. “I can’t go on” he gasped, shivering uncontrollably. I knew that I should not continue and leave him behind – he was suffering from hypothermia, and we were not carrying any additional warm clothing or sleeping bags with us. “You go ahead of me and run down the mountain” I instructed. And that is exactly what we did, reaching our pickup about an hour later in what must have been the fastest descent ever of the mountain. Fortunately, we managed to avoid tripping or breaking an ankle during our rapid descent, Bob having recovered by the time we reached our vehicle, but our attempt on Misti was over and we never returned.

Arequipa, the “white city”, had largely been built from “sillar”, a white volcanic ashlar stone which is ideal for construction purposes, being quite weather-resistant, whilst not too hard to chisel. One weekend, while I was idly driving along with Luisa in an outer suburb of the city, I passed trucks going in the opposite direction laden with

white stone blocks. “There must be a quarry near here” I thought, deciding to follow an empty truck on its return journey. It left the main road and bumped along a dirt track which led to a large, irrigated area where crops were growing, the water for irrigation supplied by scores of water-pumping windmills, creating a surreal landscape. Beyond this area, we came across a brick making factory with a brick kiln. Pausing to inspect the kiln, we continued and suddenly found ourselves driving into a quarry which had the appearance of a Biblical scene. Men, roped together for safety, were perched halfway up the craggy sides, using very long crowbars to prise boulders of rock away from the cliff face. Another man with a chisel was cutting a series of holes to create these boulders, which once they were prised from the cliff were then cut into smaller and smaller pieces, until they became brick-sized stone blocks. It was fascinating to see how the white stone blocks were prepared, no doubt using the same techniques which had been used for centuries.

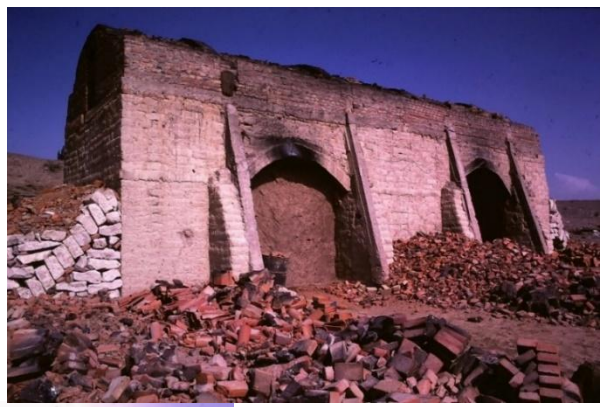

Figure 85a-b Brick kiln. The entrance is walled up and the stacked bricks are fired. It is a slow process.

The time seemed to pass quickly. It would soon be time for me to say farewell to Peru – such was the financial situation for the Majes project that no one was granted an extension to their contract and my two years were nearly up. It was time to pay my last visits to the various sectors before taking our postponed honeymoon. On my final visit to Achoma, I remembered to take the photograph of the lady and her baby (fig 59), with the vague idea that I might be able to trace her. As I passed the hamlet where I remembered taking the photograph, I stopped and followed a rough path, leading to the collection of perhaps seven or eight hovels. These had adobe walls and straw roofs with openings for a doorway with no door as such, the opening forming the entrance to a single room. I passed a farmer and showed him the photograph. “Where can I find this woman?” I asked. He pointed to one of the hovels and I walked a few more paces until I found myself standing at the doorway. There was no electricity, and it was dark inside. “Hola!” I yelled, wondering if anyone was at home. After a few seconds, a lady emerged, no doubt surprised to see this stranger. I passed the photograph to her, and she gazed at the picture, tears welling up in her eyes. It was touching to think that this picture meant so much to her and at that moment, I was almost as emotional as she was.

It was now time to visit Condoroma, the sector where I had spent two months working on the dam project. I once asked Vince “How many fatal accidents have there been since the start of construction works?” Tunnelling, in constantly changing ground conditions with explosives, was a dangerous occupation and I expected there to be quite a high casualty rate. “Thirty-three deaths” he told me. “Three were the result of tunnelling accidents, the remainder traffic accidents”. I was now about to witness the thirty-fourth death and almost be the direct cause of two, or possibly three more, if I include myself among that total.

As I set of for Condorama on that final visit, everything seemed normal. I was in the altiplano and turned off the main road to Chivay,

taking the less well-trafficked road towards Lluta where there was a further branch road to the dam. MACON employed road crews to keep the graded roads in good order, these gangs usually consisting of a motor-grader, a shovel and a water bowser, but for daily maintenance, just a water bowser would be used to keep down the dust. The track I was using, although relatively flat, was going through a series of twists and turns to avoid streams and hollows in the vicinity. A storm blew in unexpectedly, the rain cascading down my windscreen before it passed on after a few minutes. The road immediately became very slippery, and I slowed down to navigate a series of bends. As I rounded one of the bends in the road, I noticed a water bowser on its side, the truck having skidded off the road. Wondering if this accident had been reported, I stopped and went to investigate. I looked inside the cab which had been partially crushed and noticed a pair of legs protruding from under the driver's seat. The legs kicked intermittently – the driver was still alive but in a bad way. It was quite impossible to free the driver; I needed help, and I needed it fast. I continued along the track, driving as fast as I dared in the slippery conditions. After another ten minutes or so, I came across a small co-operative where a few peasants eked out a precarious existence. I stopped and indicated to them that they needed a long pole to try and lift the cab and release the driver. Despite my somewhat limited Spanish, they understood and three or four of them set off back down the road in a pick-up with a long thick pole. I doubted if they would be successful without jacks and cutting gear and so I continued on my way to Condoroma, intending to report the accident and seek further assistance for the poor bowser driver once I arrived there.

The road continued to a district called Callali, where there was a road junction, one arm leading to Condoroma and the other to Tuti, the starting point for the diversion of the Colca river. Approaching this junction, the road descended the side of a steep valley, a tributary of the Colca river flowing along the bottom. I was about halfway down the descent, the ravine to my right, when I caught sight of a MACON fuel tanker approaching in the opposite direction. I flashed my lights repeatedly to signal that he should stop; I knew that there was a good

chance that he might have a radio to communicate with the site at Condoroma. Initially, the tanker driver and his mate ignored my signal, perhaps thinking it was just an acknowledgment of the other party on this almost deserted road. The driver then suddenly realised that I wanted him to stop and applied his brake fiercely. The truck performed a pirouette on the slippery surface. As it passed me, it had rotated one hundred and eighty degrees and was still turning, somehow avoiding knocking my Beetle car and me into the ravine by a few centimetres. I peered into my rear-view mirror, watching the tanker as it continued sliding on its wayward trajectory. It appeared that there was no hope of salvation, the road had no safety barrier, and the tanker was about to plunge into the ravine. Time seemed to stand still as I watched, horrified at witnessing the tanker sliding towards the edge in slow-motion. It was the sort of scene one occasionally sees in a disaster movie; a fuel tanker with driver and mate on board, plunging into a ravine and exploding in a huge ball of fire. The edge of the road was, as I have mentioned, unprotected, but a small rock, the size of a football, had fallen from the cliff face above and lay right at the road edge in exactly the position where the front wheel of the tanker slid into it and came to rest.

All parties were now in a state of shock, but I pulled myself together to explain the situation about the earlier accident, using the radio on board the tanker to contact the site at Condoroma. “The ambulance is for site use only” I was told. “Send an ambulance and cutting gear at once” I repeated. “It is one of MACON’s drivers who is critically injured”. The operator ignored my pleas, repeating the party line and some plain talking followed, most of it coming from me. There must have been further discussion in Condoroma as they did send a rescue crew. I learned later, that by the time they arrived, the water bowser driver had died. I was relieved that this was my last visit travelling along treacherous roads to the Condoroma site, noting that the construction of the dam was now well underway and keeping to the programme I had produced.

During my stay in Peru, I was only directly involved in one traffic accident – a “hit and run” in which I did the hitting, and my victim did

the running! I was passing through the Plaza de Armas (the main square) in the Arequipa suburb of Cayma. Entering the plaza, one goes through an arch and a change of gradient, so I had slowed to about 20mph. I had just passed through the arch, when a boy of about twelve years of age ran into my car, bouncing off my vehicle. Twenty metres further on, a policeman stood on guard outside Cayma police station. Of course, I needed no invitation to stop, but was concerned in case the policeman decided that I was at fault, being a "rich gringo" who could afford to pay compensation. "You must take the boy to hospital!" instructed the policeman. It could have been worse, but this was still bad news. I would have to find the "workers" hospital in Arequipa, wait with the boy for several hours to be attended to, collect any prescriptions and take them and pay for them at a local pharmacy (public hospitals do not provide free medication to patients), and then take him home. I also needed to contact his parents – they probably didn't have a phone, so that would not be easy, and I might be accused of abducting a child. While these thoughts flashed through my head, as well as the thought of making a police statement which could take hours, the policeman looked for the victim. I also looked around the plaza, but there was no sign of the boy. The policeman shrugged his shoulders, I shrugged mine before I continued on my way, with a slight dent in the car to show for the incident.

During those last months in Peru, I spent a number of weekends visiting attractive areas on the outskirts of Arequipa where there would often be the murmur of running water. Picaflors (hummingbirds), the size of a large bumble bee would dart in and out of tall flowers, the sun shone, a soft breeze blew, and I would perhaps have a picnic under a tree with members of Luisa's family. There were invariably other attractions to look at – on old mill perhaps, alpacas grazing, or farmers tending their crops. I once went to a bull fight, not with a matador, but simply a contest to see which bull would force his rivals out of the ring. Sometimes, it was stalemate, but no bull was killed, enabling them to return to fight another day.

The Majes project was approaching the time at which the entire system could be filled with water and tested. It was all very well

Figure 87 A picaflor (hummingbird)

Figure 88 One of the first farms at Siguas. Soon, the desert would be planted with crops and inhabited by farm animals.

transporting water to the pampas at Siguas, but the matter of awarding land to potential farmers had to be addressed.

Advertisements were inserted in local newspapers seeking applicants who were prepared to farm the land, with plots being released for quite a low price. As might be imagined, there was considerable interest, and I paid a last visit to Siguas to look at the nearly completed canals and aqueducts which were to deliver the water. Within the next two or three years, the desert would be transformed into fertile agricultural land.

There was one thing Luisa and I needed to arrange prior to my departure – our honeymoon! We decided to visit Lake Titicaca, then take a steam train to Cuzco and after visiting the Inca ruins there, a further train to Machu Pichu. Our hotel room in Puno had a large window which looked directly over Lake Titicaca and from where we could witness a glorious sunset. After two days in Puno, we took the steam train to Cuzco which departed an hour late and spent all day trundling through the countryside, making frequent stops where local peasants would try to sell food and drink to hungry passengers. Although it was my third visit to Cuzco and the surrounding area, it was still a magical experience.

Figure 89 Woman collecting reeds, Lake Titicaca

As my time in Peru drew to a close, I heard about a strange incident. A MACON pickup truck had been ambushed in the Andes, the occupants made to get out and the truck pushed into a ravine. There was a rumour that this may have been connected to a mysterious group called "Sendero Luminoso" or "Shining Path", a Maoist movement founded by Abimael Guzmán, a former university philosophy professor. Based in the Ayacucho province in the remote Andes in central Peru, the movement attracted rural peasants who felt ignored by central Government, along with a few of Guzman's former students. The movement was starting to become notorious shortly before I was to leave Peru. The guerrillas ruled by terror and the Government forces and trained militia responded in a like manner. Local peasants, who did not support the Maoist movement, were trained and armed by the army, being encouraged to assassinate Shining Path members. Nearly 70,000 people have died in the conflict, and there are still isolated incidents of terrorism in certain areas, although the attacks greatly diminished after Guzmán was captured in 1992 and paraded through the streets of Lima in a cage.[34]

Expenditure on the Majes Project was tightly controlled and extensions to contracts were rarely permitted and my MACON contract ended exactly two years after my arrival. I needed to find work; Tarmac had nothing to offer me other than a contract in Algeria, which was hardly the place for a newly married couple. They had also decided not to pursue further work in South America, so my detailed analysis of equipment and programming for hard rock tunnelling in the Andes was no longer required! I had read that there was a severe recession in the UK, and I decided to return by myself and try and find work before Luisa arrived. Little did I realise how difficult that would be.

[34] Of that number, half were killed by the Shining Path movement, the other half by government forces and militias. Many atrocities were committed on all sides and considerable damage caused to infrastructure, including a national blackout when power installations were bombed. In comparison, about 3,600 people lost their lives in The Troubles in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1998.

Figure 90 View of 6057m high Chachani mountain from the suburb of Yanahuara, Arequipa

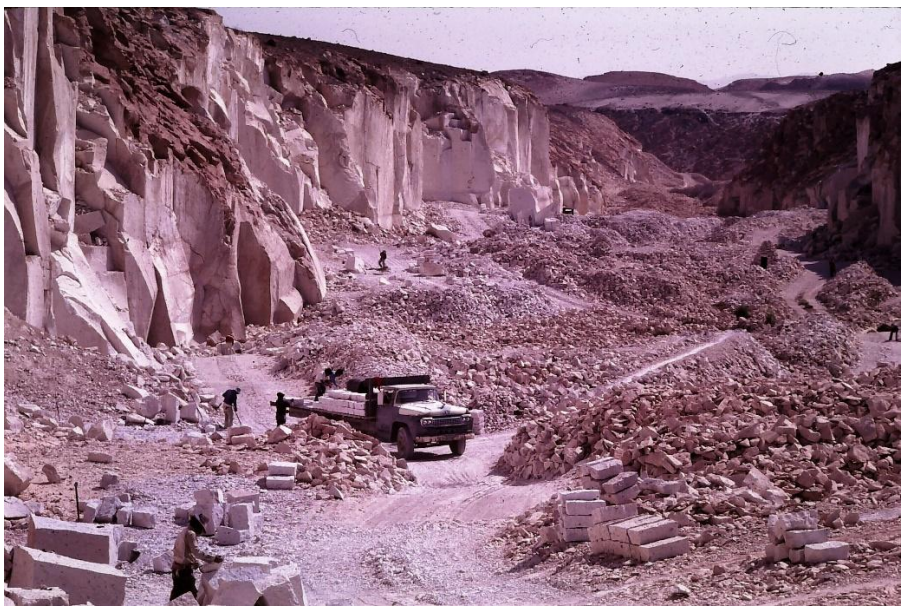

Figure 91 The quarry for the white volcanic stone (sillar) used to build the city of Arequipa

11. Watching over me

As far as I remember,
from my fading memory
My heart is always yearning,
for something to believe
With not much going for me,
but all the world to see

There must have been an angel,
watching over me

First verse of "Watching Over Me", lyrics by Paul Carrack and Chris Difford

I returned in the autumn of 1982 to find a country in the grip of a major recession which was getting worse by the day. With UK unemployment at three million and rising, a bank rate of 10% and painful inflation of about 7%, there was little appetite for anyone to spend money. In one way this was fortunate; I could visit the empty showroom of a local car dealership and buy a new car for a knock-down price. On the other hand, construction projects were almost non-existent. I bought the "Construction News" and other trade journals and browsed the "yellow pages", looking for any construction companies. There were very few firms advertising for vacancies, but at least I was able to build up a list of addresses, enabling me to write to nearly every company of any consequence. By the time Luisa arrived in November, I had written to about fifty companies and received three replies. Two were polite "We regret that we have no vacancies at the current time" and one was from Bovis who had an office in Westbury, Wiltshire. Other requests for employment went unanswered. Bovis granted me an interview which went well, and I was about to be offered employment when my interviewer broke the news a week or so later, that he had received a directive that all recruitment should be stopped.

Luisa and I now needed to find somewhere to live on a temporary basis until I received a job offer. The nearby Birmingham suburb of Moseley was an attractive proposition, and I visited the offices of a company which had an apartment to let. Negotiations were going well until I was asked about my employment. “I am currently looking for work” I told the lady requesting my details, “but I can afford to pay three months in advance”. This cut little ice. “We have just been given strict instructions not to let properties to unemployed people any longer” she replied. I must have looked crestfallen, for after a pause of a few seconds, she continued, “Well, you are the last and there will be no further exceptions”.

Figure 92. The apartment block in Moseley where we lived for about five months whilst unemployed (photo by AH Field). It appears to now be double glazed.

The studio apartment had probably been built in the 1960’s, having a large single glazed window which was fashionable at that time. It consisted of a main room which had a fold-down bed and a twin element electric fire, a tiny kitchen and a toilet with a shower. During the cold winter months, we huddled in front of the fire, trying to keep warm. The 1982/83 “El Niño” was said to be the most severe of the twentieth century. Originating off the coast of Peru, this irregular but cyclical event is caused by changes in sea temperature as the result of interaction of warm and cold currents in the Pacific Ocean. Not only does it affect the climate in Peru, but this event also causes world-wide extremes of climate: some areas are exposed to hot and dry conditions, in others cold and wet. In the UK, the temperatures plummeted with snow lying on the ground for several weeks. Once a week, Luisa and I trudged to the High Street, where I joined the long queue outside the Employment Exchange, more usually called the

“Unemployment Exchange”. There was never any chance that they would offer me a job – the visit was to ensure that I was not claiming unemployment benefit whilst working. During the next two months, I wrote a further series of letters, perhaps nearly thirty, all without reply.

It was probably mid-March, as the weather started to improve, when I made one of an occasional series of visits to my parents’ house in the nearby suburb of Selly Park. I stayed about thirty minutes and as I was leaving, the telephone in the kitchen rang. I picked up the receiver, ready to pass it over to my mother. “Is that Brian Davies?”, said a voice at the other end. Puzzled, I answered “Yes!” “Are you still looking for a job as a planner?” continued the voice. I reassured the person at the other end that I was. “It’s rather embarrassing actually” continued the voice, “you see your application that you sent in October fell down behind a radiator and I have only just found it at precisely the time that we have a vacancy. When can you come and see us – we are in Hammersmith, London?”.

The job was for Cementation International, a company tendering for international projects and requiring the occasional overseas trip – an ideal introduction to working once more in the UK. I was employed - my guardian angel had not deserted me after all.

Afterword

Agatha Christie said in her autobiography, “Never go back to a place where you have been happy. Until you do it remains alive for you. If you go back, it will be destroyed.” Wise words, and so I have resisted the temptation to revisit Oman and the town of Aqaba in Jordan. Both places have changed beyond recognition and now attract hordes of well-heeled tourists.

Of course, I have had cause to return many times to Arequipa and have even ventured to the Colca Valley on two occasions, the first with my two young sons. On the most recent visit, Luisa and I stayed at a lodge near the village of Yanque. The hotel was well designed, taking full advantage of the magnificent setting. The hotel employees, however, all came from Arequipa or other distant towns. The one exception was a local man employed to look after a few llamas and alpacas to entertain young children. Luisa asked him how the local village had benefited from tourism. “Nothing has changed” he told her. “The roads are still unmaintained, and we don’t get any employment”. That evening we sat down to our meal at the lodge. Perhaps a local folkloric group would play music. Indeed, music was played, coming from the speaker system; it was provided by Abba. “Why do you not at least play Andean music?” asked Luisa. The waiter was very honest: “We just follow the instructions from the owners”. “Who are the owners?” asked Luisa? “They live in Switzerland and there is a company in Lima which manages the hotel and is where the profits go”.

We had a better experience when visiting the irrigated plain at Siguas, which was now fully developed as farmland. Luisa has a cousin who had developed one of these farms and we decided to call in one day, although we did not have the farmer’s contact details, thus arriving without any advance warning. We were welcomed by the farmer’s wife, who let us wander round until the cousin returned from the local market. Meanwhile, our elder son, Ivor, noticed a rabbit in a

hutch and made friends with the animal while Luisa and I admired the wide selection of healthy fruit trees and crops. On arrival of the cousin, we were treated to a sample of his home-made Pisco brandy after he showed us the still. “You must stay for lunch” insisted the cousin and his wife set to work preparing a very tasty meal. As we finished eating, Ivor asked, “What type of meat was that?”. I looked at Luisa, who, hesitating slightly, replied “Chicken”. We were relieved that Ivor did not return to look for the rabbit in the empty hutch.

As I enter my retirement, Arequipa beckons once again as a place where I can spend a few months during the British winters, remembering my earlier adventures.