

Captains Flat to Bougainville – off to help build a Nation

by Christina Taylor

MANY LOCAL residents grapple with ever increasing highway traffic on their way to town. On the phone from Port Moresby, Captains Flat resident Mark Smith has a laugh describing the commute to his work in remote Papua New Guinea.

“Occasionally when working in Bougainville I would travel by open boat as there were no roads and there weren’t many aircraft flying in. It’s a 20ft fibreglass boat with an out-board motor and we just got out and headed down the coast! It’s very exciting ... it’s also very uncomfortable!”

Originally from Sydney, Smith relocated to Canberra and began working at the head office of the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) specialising in tax policy and legislation. Looking to save some money to purchase a home, 12 years ago he made the move to Captains Flat, initially renting one of the old miners’ cottages in the village.

“When I got out there I discovered that it was a great place to live, a unique small, very rural village. Everybody knows everybody.” He was wooed by the village charm and after two years he bought some local acreage and settled permanently in the community. Well, that is when he’s not in remote Papua New Guinea...

His commute is a bit longer to help collect taxes for PNG development

So, how does one initiate a working move from Captains Flat to Papua New Guinea (PNG) – one of the poorest nations in the Asia-Pacific? “I think a colleague from the ATO alerted me to an advertisement in the newspapers – I’d missed it!” Embarking on a drastic lifestyle change from Palerang, Smith admits friends and family had mixed reactions about the AusAid position in PNG.

“Some may have been a little envious, some maybe thought I must be crazy (laughs). Generally speaking, people were pretty supportive and very curious about what I’d be doing.”

Remote provinces of PNG have relied entirely on national government grants to fund necessary programs and services. This practice has slowed down development in isolated communities, and areas such as health, education and law-and-order have all been severely underfunded.

Smith’s job is to assist with the establishment of tax arrangements in remote provinces so they are able to independently collect revenue. This will in turn provide a sustainable income for provincial governments and speed up local development and provision of services.

Smith first travelled to PNG in 2004 as part of the AusAid *Enhanced Cooperation*



Pidgin English: Smith’s favourite expression is the word for helicopter: ‘mixmaster belong Jesus Christ’

Program and, after completing his original contract, was asked to return in February 2009. This time he was to assist tax development within the terms of the Bougainville Peace Agreement which was created following the end of the deadly nine-year conflict.

When speaking about his work Smith is clear that the purpose isn’t to impose an Australian solution. “In Bougainville my counterpart was the Chief Bougainville Collector of Taxes, Peter Siana. He and I worked very closely and at all times he was in control.”

Fascinating place to work, and may assist birth of a new country

During his time in PNG Smith has been able to work and travel in remarkable locations such as New Ireland and New Britain and he reveals that “a lot of the culture in the remote places has retained its authenticity and it’s absolutely fascinating”. He has also been

introduced to a range of the countless regional dialects as well as Pidgin English (or Tok Pisin). “There are all sorts of interesting words and expressions. My favourite one is the word for helicopter: *mixmaster belong Jesus Christ*.”

Drawing on his experiences in PNG, Smith says he would recommend this type of aid work “without hesitation” but concedes it’s not an easy environment to work in “There are great personal and professional rewards for those who are able to make a go of it.

“They’re heading towards a referendum in the Autonomous region of Bougainville so another reason why it’s such a fabulous opportunity for me is; I’m providing advice which may eventually assist in the formation of a new independent country.”

Smith will return to Captains Flat for Christmas and accompanying him will be his adopted daughter from PNG on her first trip to Australia. Smith estimates that he’ll continue on in PNG for another year or two. He is extremely positive about the country’s development and predicts that “it has a great future”.

Relax, no new Queanbeyan Council rate hikes

QUEANBEYAN COUNCIL is not considering further rate hikes or cuts to community and environmental services, contrary to a recent report in the *Canberra Times*, according to Queanbeyan Mayor Tim Overall.



Clearly annoyed, Mayor Overall called the report “erroneous”. He said rate hikes and cuts to services are “not on the agenda”, following Council’s request last year for a special 5.8 percent rate variation for three years which was approved by the NSW government in June. This money will be applied to maintenance of infrastructure like footpaths and sports facilities.

He also attempted to clarify, in a response letter to the *Canberra Times* on 1 December, a charge that Council was failing to meet its targets on adequate indigenous youth and outreach services. “These projects are just two of 28 community service programs overseen by Council ... and both projects are meeting obligations to funding bodies. The financial position of Council has nothing to do with the performance of these funded projects.”

He said a recent auditor’s report says Council’s overall financial position is satisfactory and Council in fact has a low (1.02%) debt service ratio. It has been able in this financial year to double the dollars set aside for asset depreciation – meaning fixing Council-owned buildings and venues as they deteriorate.



WATER WATER: The Queanbeyan River looking decidedly vigorous at the beginning of December. With much of south-eastern Australia flood affected, the meteorologists tell us we have just completed the hottest decade on record in modern times and the pattern is set to escalate. Intense and extreme rainfall and snowfall have all been predicted as outcomes of climate change, as evaporation increases, charging storm and rain clouds and as the oceans warm up. This monsoonal effect is already being strongly felt in coastal northern Queensland, where a *Bulletin* colleague reports that the residential landscape around Townsville – built on a flood plain – is turning into a swamp and electrical storms are daily occurrences. Six cyclones are expected this year along the northern coast. Here or there, evidence shows that electronic communications can and will be affected. That’s just one aspect of interesting times ahead for all of us, as the world’s leaders continue to dither on emission reduction targets.

Photo: Maria Taylor



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