

Eighty and still going fine!

Well this is our 80th Blog Posting! We have had more than 9200 viewers during this time - an average of over 100 viewers per post. Not bad statistics for first time amateur bloggers recording their adventures while on volunteer service in a remote Pacific Island through a rickety internet connection!

However all things must come to an end and our final days in Bougainville are flashing by- we leave for home in about two weeks –on Good Friday 6th April. I think too that the life of this particular blog is also drawing to an end and I will probably make the next post our final with a reflection on the two-year adventure - after our departure. I have enjoyed writing this and you all seem to have mostly enjoyed what I have to show and tell. Thank you for your support and feedback.

Life has continued busy but with few dramatic highlights since I last wrote (*all changed later as the post was being written!*)

VSA changes in Bougainville

Murray our local VSA Country Programme Manager left this week. His “Go Pinis” celebrations took place last Saturday evening with a barbeque (chicken and some pork – a rare treat that Murray managed to find in a local store - and a shared meal.) He is to be replaced by Alison – a farmer’s wife from the Chatham Islands - where?? – you might well ask – they are cool wet windswept dots in the South Pacific well East of Christchurch, NZ – a cynic might say their chief aim as far as NZ is concerned is to extend their territorial waters and give them access rights to the fish over a large stretch of the Pacific ocean- but they are officially part of New Zealand!

We celebrated Alison’s arrival with a meal last week at a local guesthouse – an entre’ of battered fish portions on rice with a nice sauce followed with a served plate of strips of (rather tough) lamb in another tasty sauce, kaukau (sweet potato) greens cooked in coconut milk, banana, pineapple and pawpaw. Meat (along with diesel) seems to be in short supply in Arawa at the moment so we enjoyed the lamb, happily chewing away to get the full value of the taste! Good-bye Murray – thanks for your support and welcome Alison.

Some new volunteers will be starting up about the same time as we go, but they will not be taking on new assignments.

PNG Power

I mentioned in my last Post the arrival in Arawa of 24hr power thanks to PNG Power setting up a couple of large diesel generators down the road and re-wiring the town. We enjoyed a couple of weeks of almost continuous power before things started to go wrong, with frequent blackouts. The problem turned out to be dirty diesel. PNG Power had contracted a local prominent citizen to supply their drums of diesel and his stock seems to have been contaminated! The long and short of it has been that the generators have been off permanently for nearly two weeks and the VSA generator has been back earning its keep –not without a price I might add – we suddenly found the control panel was live and delivered a significant “belt” when one threw the circuit breaker and again when one switched off the diesel motor. Murray

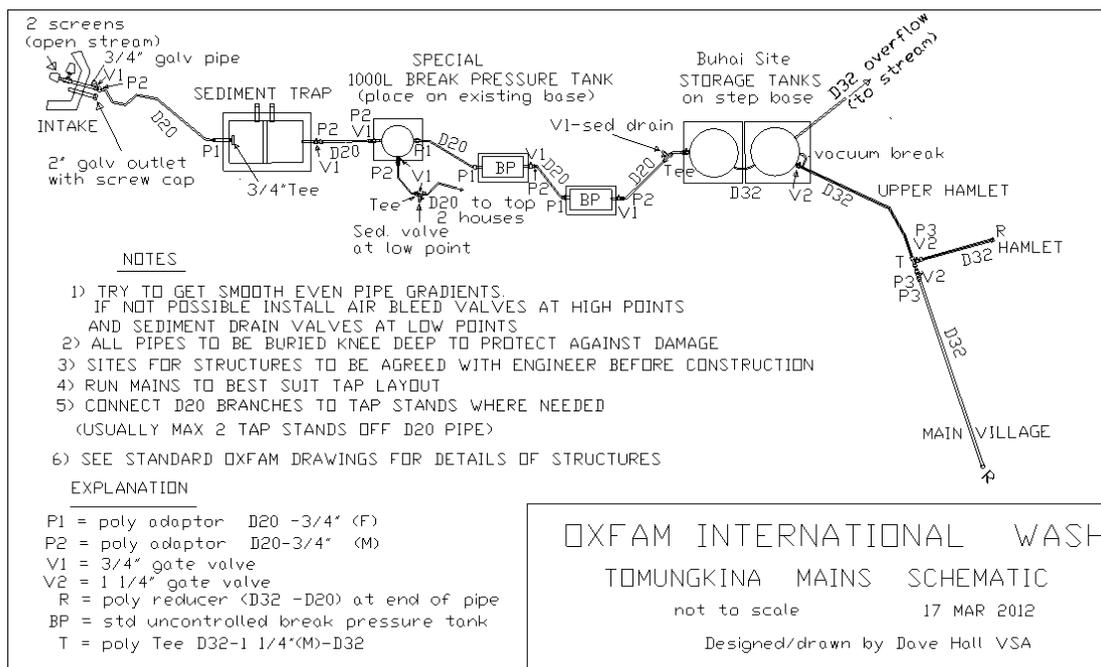
was away in Buka so we resorted to using “bubble wrap” as an insulation while gingerly throwing the switches- fortunately it didn’t seem to affect the output at the houses and we were able to keep our fridges and lights going for our previously customary 3.5 hrs in the morning and 2pm to 9.30pm after midday. The local electrician was summonsed to sort it out and found that the diesel mechanic had had to remove a couple of wires while servicing the generator motor and had swapped them over when replacing them.

(resumed Saturday)

A rumour that circulated briefly was that Arawa would not be seeing power from PNG Power until May – long after we’d gone. However I am pleased to report that it is back in business and we are back on 24hr. power! (supposedly - it was out for the morning again) The boat is back in town and it must have unloaded a new batch of fuel!

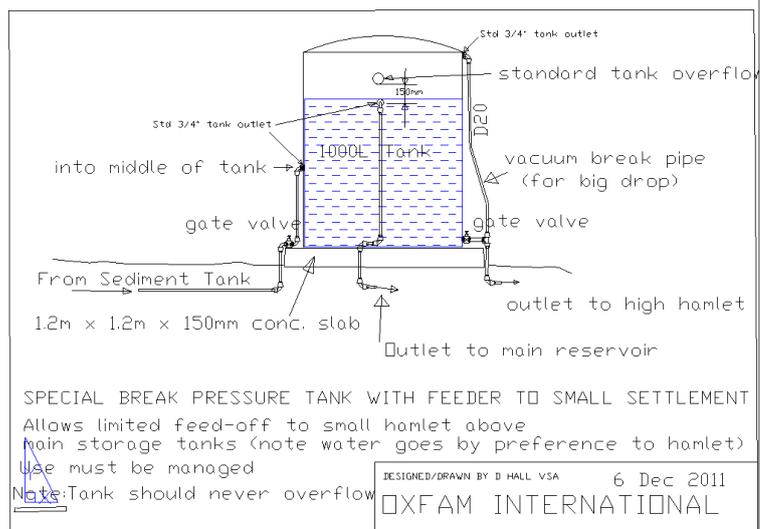
W.A.SH with Oxfam

That same boat is bringing a container load of pipe fittings for Oxfam to allow it to finish off the systems it has been working on and I hope to be able to finish at least a couple more before I go so that the workforce gets a better understanding of what they need to do. There are a couple of tricky systems with isolated houses high in the scheme that need special arrangements to ensure they get consistent water without over-pressurising the pipes below in the main village – all employing methods that do not require complex maintenance and operating regimes. One system in particular has a fall of three hundred metres (nearly 1,000ft) from spring source to lowest tap, which would create static water pressures significantly higher than the 120m maximum our plastic pipe systems are designed to cope with, unless break pressure devices are used, and there are at least two other systems with similar problems.



Below is a drawing of the special break pressure tank that I devised to improve the chances of all getting a reasonable supply of water by supplying

the hamlet first from a small tank with the overflow going to the main reservoir. It does have the disadvantage that if someone in the hamlet leaves a tap running, eventually the main village will run out! However in a system which fills the reservoir over 24hrs and supplies from the reservoir at a much faster rate to deal with the usual morning and evening peak flows, if some in the village



leave a tap or two running continuously, eventually the reservoir will run dry and most will lose out. In a part of the world where home-made systems typically run continuously without a tap, often with a “swamp” all around the discharge point, this is going to require a cultural change and some discipline over closing taps when not in use to guarantee everyone gets their fair share. I guess getting this right might take a while! However providing an unlimited supply of water is just not practical – and also the overflows and run-offs create their own swamp problems.

Anyway toilet construction has picked up- especially after people were able to see how neat and tidy the VIP (Ventilated Improved Pit) toilets could be – and also not unreasonably smelly.



The first picture shows a completed tap stand and the second is of a VIP toilet under construction by its owner using bush materials to save money. A vent pipe is installed from a hole in the slab up through the roof to draw smells away. Oxfam provides a mould for the slab, cement and mesh reinforcing and helps the owner pour the slab. Everything else - including digging the pit - is carried out by the villager. The third is of a couple of kids (plus friend) watching dad building their toilet. They are obviously not too sure about this strange white person who has rocked up in their village!

To-morrow I am off to Amuapong to oversee finishing off the scheme there with the bits delivered off the recently arrived boat and to try to sort out a

problem of insufficient water, probably caused by air pockets trapped in the rather up- and- down pipe (despite my best efforts to get them to follow the contours.)

Drama

Bougainville produced its fair share of drama recently with automatic rifle fire near the market in Arawa on Monday morning (local dispute that apparently ended with no holes in anybody – just a shot-out vehicle tyre) and the torching on Friday night in Buka of the sister ship to the Rabaul Queen and two vessels used for carrying copra from the islands to the markets, which happened to be owned by the same shipping company. You may recall the recent tragic sinking of the overloaded Rabaul Queen near Lae with large loss of life, many of whom were Bougainvillean students returning to their teaching institutions at the start of the academic year. Heavily armed Bougainville ex-combatants boarded the three sister ships which happened to be in Buka soon after the sinking and have been holding them and demanding financial compensation for the loss of life. An inquest has been scheduled but it seems that the ex-combatants felt that compensation was not coming quickly enough and torched the vessels – classic example of the local pay-back thinking. And the unarmed police force had to stand back and let it all happen.

It will be interesting to see how the students and the ordinary folk who took advantage of the fares that are much lower than the exorbitant air travel in PNG will be travelling around in future, and who will be carrying the island's copra harvest - and at what cost! I wonder who will be prepared to invest a substantial amount of money in vessels to replace the torched ones and expose themselves to the obvious risks! It will also be interesting to see who is going to clean up the environmental mess from the leaking fuel oil too.

Sadly Bougainvilleans seem to be continuing their collective habit of “cutting off their noses to spite their face”.

As a follow-on from the earlier incident an associate of the man firing the shots at the market was shot a couple of days ago and his “wontok” established a road block at Kobuan on the road between Arawa and Kieta, probably to try to apprehend the later gunman or his mates, so things are a little tense between the two rival factions. (Kobuan is where the Mr Pip filming crew boarded their banana boat for Pidia village where they did much of the filming.)

Rumours

There have been a couple of interesting rumours going around – a large earthquake and tsumani have been forecast for to-day – one teacher even cancelled her class- although it could have been a convenient excuse for a day off. Some do seem quite convinced at the accuracy of the forecast. (9pm and I haven't started shaking or swimming yet!)

The other involves some white folk abducting kids and cutting out their heart and lungs for organ transplant in Asia– so kids have been advised not to walk alone. We are advised that it has nothing to do with the crew travelling though the island collecting blood for the hospital services.

The Pup

A couple of “before and after” photos. You may recall an earlier story of a neighbour’s pup that inveigled its way onto our deck and regular meals that contain a bit more protein than what he would otherwise have received. He is now a thriving adolescent pup who is in the “chewing-everything-with-razor-sharp-teeth” phase. His mange has gone – see the difference! It’s amazing what a few cans of cheap and nasty local tuna and rice plus scraps can do! Poor fellow will be having to fend for himself in a couple of weeks time – but at least he’s had a much improved start to life!



Rosie’s Efforts

Rosie is back at Kirokai school teaching English a couple of mornings a week. The library continues to attract a lot of readers. It seems they are organising a meal for her next Thursday as a thank you and to farewell her. I have been invited along too.

She has also continued to pursue her dream of a functioning x-ray suite at the local medical centre. With the help of folk in NZ – in particular Jean and Anne in Whakatane- a good collection of “useful bits” have been loaded into the container of building materials for the Lloyd Jones (author of Mr Pip) inspired library and arts centre for Arawa. She managed to get the Shimadzu PNG serviceman to divert to Arawa, while carrying out work at the Buka hospital, to inspect the two ancient x-ray units that have been gathering dust in a back room. One is apparently dead but he managed to cajole the other one to work- but for how long as spares are not made any more. Rosie is now looking for a table-top film processor and newer x-ray machine – plus some kind individual or organisation to finance their delivery to Arawa!

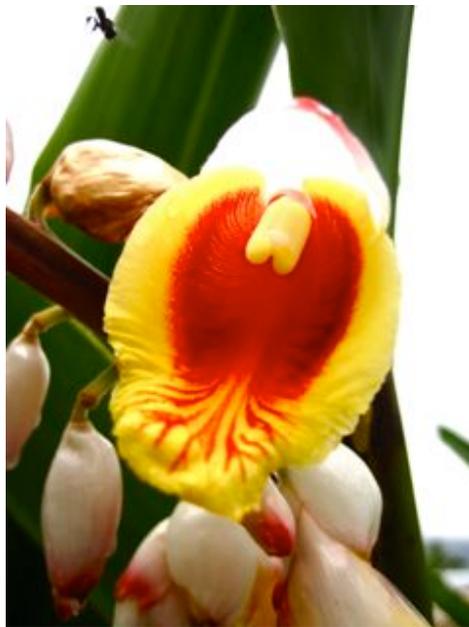
Cousin Joanne from Auckland put out a general request to the NZ Chiropractor fraternity for redundant film x-ray units (modern x-rays are

digitally recorded on computer) and received some interesting offers – unfortunately what have been so generously offered are probably not quite satisfactory for a hospital environment - but the enquiries continue.

I am much more inclined to be put off by the seemingly insurmountable barriers looming ahead – but she plods on – chipping away at them until - suddenly a crack opens up - and another appears in the rear-view mirror!

More spectacular Bougainville Flowers

To finish off - another couple of beautiful flowers not yet recorded on this blog, two orchids and another spectacular red and yellow bloom that looks orchid-like but is probably not. The small white orchids (about 12 mm across) seem to me like small graceful ballerinas bowing to their audience at the end of their performance!



Take care!