



GEORGE

A story relating the Past
to the Future



JEFF LAMBERT

“George”

My story about George, dates back to 1957 when I was a member of a military survey team implementing survey control for military mapping. We had worked our way across the west and top end, from the spinifex plains of the channel country to the more rugged terrain of the Gregory Range enclosing the south eastern extremity of the Carpentaria Basin. Our final astronomical control point was to be sited near the Yappar River. The Yappar flows from the rough and isolated western watershed of the Gregory Range.

We had met many wonderful people in our travels across the outback and heard many outback stories. But a character by the name of George, to my mind at least and despite the accolades to others mentioned above, took my attention more so than others. To me George was a classic example of the early pioneering spirit that in many ways still prevails in the far west and top end.

The Yappar River flows into the Norman River which flows almost parallel to the Flinders River and on into the Gulf of Carpentaria at Normanton. At the time of my story, some fifty six years ago, there were no beef roads as of today and cattle were overlanded by drovers along established stock routes to the nearest rail head, there for transportation to southern markets.

Our access to the Yappar was via Richmond. Richmond is a small town approximately midway between Townsville and Mt Isa on the Flinders Highway. Well, one could be forgiven for calling it a highway in those days as that was its proclaimed naming, whatever one thought of the “*Highway*.” But to we bushies, used to outback tracks, it was not a bad road when all said and done. Richmond was then the gateway to the eastern Carpentaria Basin country.

No matter how one prided oneself as a bushy, it was always our practice to engage with the locals and Government inspectors as to the best routes and knowhow on who owned what and who was who, so to speak. In this I had discussions with the local land agent and stock route inspector who knew well the country we were to traverse --- at least as far as Mt Norman Outstation. We were not planning to head that way for a few days, however he mentioned that he would let them know that we were heading through their country as he was due there the next day. Such notification was always a good safety policy but as much a matter of courtesy to the owners as well.

A few days later we set out before dawn for the outstation. From the outstation, tracks were rare and rough and flood prone in the wet. Our destination lay some eighty kilometres north of the outstation. Arriving at the Norman River we came upon a windmill pumping up to a large tank associated with a cattle trough and holding yards. A timely reminder that although the Norman ran wild and turbulently in the wet, during the dry it could be classified, in its upper reaches, as non-perennial along with its many tributaries.

Squatting on the top of the tank were two figures, who as we drew closer proved to be washing clothes and with heads bent down and faces hidden by broad brimmed and well worn ringer's hats, appeared to be not even aware of our presence as we came to a halt beside the tank. We guessed however that they would have spotted our dust well before hearing our vehicle.

I always made it a practice to let the local identity control the conversation in the initial stage --- gives them the running so that they proceed at their own pace and pick the topic. The topic quite often, a promising cloud in the sky, or a blazing hot sun, or the flow in the river. But inevitably at first, related to the weather.

A period of absolute quiet, broken only by the warning call of a crow to his flock, prevailed for a little time until the figure on the left raised his head momentarily with a *"Giddy"* before resuming his crouch and washing activity, until, moments later, the head raised again. *"Names Perry --- George"*. and the head dropped and the washing continued.

"Nice to meet you George" I responded. The silence continued with only the sound of the crows in the distance to be heard until the head raised again and with a nod toward the figure on the right:

"Nephew Tom" to which the second face was revealed for the first time with a *"Howdy"*

"Pleased to meet you Tom" and both heads dropped and left us to ponder what next, with my intention to introduce my party once I could see again one, or better, two faces. But George interrupted without looking up:

You Lambert?

Yes, how did you come by my name?

The crows took over again as if they too were surprised at the revelation and George gave them time to have their say.

"Went down to the outstation to collect some supplies and mail and the land agent told me you's was comin. Been waitin for yous --- Tom and me." Surprise was the word for the moment as I enquired:

"How long have you been waiting George?" Once again the long pause and this time even the crows joined in the silence, seemingly also awaiting George's reply.

"Only three days"

"Three days you say?" and surprise turned to astonishment as the resultant delayed response once again allowed time to look around for George's camp.

"Yep --- camped on the other side of the river --- can't be too careful this time of the year --- weather breaks and she comes down so rapidly that unless you get your arse into gear pronto, you're liable to finish up in the gulf. But depending which side you are on, that's where you stay until she goes down again."

We forded the river and proceeded to George's camp where he proudly showed us his old tractor. Old, but reliable, claimed George. Fortified with a hunk of George's damper, spread with honey that Tom had cut out of a tree whilst they were waiting for us (never an idle moment in the bush) we headed for George's hut with George squeezed into the Jeep and Tom bringing up the rear in the tractor.

Somehow I had that feeling that George was going to come all the way with us as he outlined the pitfalls the country presented. I could see that he was hankering for an invitation to join us until finally:

"Yer know Jeff, I would feel really guilty if, knowing the country like I do, and seeing that the monsoon could be on us at any time, if I didn't offer to come with you up to the Yapper."

"That would be just fine George if you feel you can afford the time that is?"

"Oh times no object out here, as a matter of fact I was thinking of having a day or two off and I can show you some shortcuts". So George became an honorary member of the team and I think we made his day.

The glint of iron through the scrub told us that we had arrived at George's hut. From the start it was obvious that George didn't believe in engaging architects. Bush timber formed the structural frame and corrugated iron the roof and walls. Coach screwed and rope lashed sections of the wall could be propped open for ventilation and cooling. The floor was bare earth and beds were debarked sapling upright frames with two horizontal bearers between which hessian was stretched but which now bore the sagging shape to more readily accommodate the human form.

The additional and separate ablution and toilet shared similar architectural skills, however the bush bough toilet seating intrigued in that it suggested that a steady balancing act was necessary to perform. Either that or perhaps swing from the rafters.

But some modern items were evident in two old kerosene fridges, which not only provided adequate cooling but also formed an effective barrier against a myriad of flies. But I was anxious to get under way and establish our astronomical station before nightfall, so George grabbed an old coat and several hunks of salt beef and once again squeezed into the jeep.

But it proved that George earned his keep as he had us on site a good hour before nightfall. The nature of the star observations called for position line fixes. This entailed observations to stars at satisfactory elevations and bearings within each of the four quadrants. Clouds raced across the sky playing hide and seek with the stars and as time passed I began to despair that mother nature might get the better of us ---- at least that night.

A lot hinged on obtaining this fix as it was the last to effect the control over a series of maps we had planned for the west and the top end. The planned procedure being to use the duration of the wet season to effect the necessary computations, back at Brisbane, to enable the compilation and printing of the maps at the Survey Corps establishment at Bendigo in Victoria. So much then depended in this

fix for latitude and longitude before the wet set in, for as George was not hesitant in telling us, our present location was, most definitely, no place to be in the wet.

We took it in turns to catch some shuteye and watch for the required openings in the clouds. I used the time to yarn about certain topics with George who was too interested in what was going on to bother about sleep. In reply to my enquiry as to why, at his age, he was still battling on in this hostile environment:

“Well I guess I am getting on a bit and ya quite right there. Ya see every year when the wet sets in I come down with dysentery and with the rivers up the only way out is by light aircraft from a very precarious emergency airstrip. I used to get it occasionally but of late it is more of a regular event once the wet sets in for some reason. The problem is that Tom risks his life in getting me through flooded creeks to the strip and the young pilot does the same, things being what they are out here in the wet.”

“So I know that I should be rightly living in the city ---- after all Richmond is not such a bad place ya know --- but I keep thinking of Tom --- all this is about him ya know and until such times as he finds himself a partner in life, I can’t really leave him out here on his lonesome --- this country’s too dangerous for that, so you see the predicament I’m in.”

I went on to ask what cattle best suited this part of the country. Some of the small landholders, it is well known, helped stock their holdings at the expense of absentee landlords --- the big cattle barons, and you don’t ask where the breeders originated from. What is known as --- podydodgin’--- or if carried out on a moonlight night --- moonlightin’ can be a precarious occupation demanding good horsemanship, a very good knowledge of the owner’s whereabouts, the same of his terrain, the grazing habits and whereabouts of his cattle and if moonlightin’, the nocturnal vision of an owl.

But I feel sure that George had nothing to do with such illegalities --- nothing whatsoever. However I make that statement only on the innocent demeanour George displayed when the subject was broached. Having not met his neighbours of small holdings, I could not so judge their demeanour, but George did tell me about one neighbour Beameye Bell who, without implying any guilt whatsoever, mysteriously received some sudden, unwanted ventilation to his hat.

“Yep, they say that the bullet neatly parted his hair down the middle it was that close. But ye’d never know ‘cause Beameye was so proud of that hat displaying the bullet hole, that he never took the dang thing off. I’m sure Beameye goes to sleep with it on and my bet is that he will go to the cattle man’s rest in the sky --- still showing off that bloomin’ hat.”

Relentlessly the clouds obscured either one quadrant or the other and sometimes all. Then George asked me where I was staying in the city, which he called Richmond. Naming the hotel he concurred that it was the best in town then after a pause, which I was getting patiently used to, knowing that there was generally more to come, George asked what I thought of the woman running the hotel.

“An attractive woman who runs a clean hotel, the meals are good, beds are better than ringers beds, beers cold and well headed, plenty of hot water, what more could you ask for of a country pub. I see she runs the pub mainly on her own as her husband is not tolerant of the pub life --- on beck and call most of the day and night and spends a lot of his time up on his gold show on the Woolgar. No --- she runs a very good pub George --- why do you ask?”

“Oh its nothing --- well its just that --- I’m not her favourite boy from the bush of late. Let me tell you: I had arranged to meet a mate see --- at the pub like. Well he didn’t turn up so I was sitting there when I visited just recently, only about six months ago, when Mary comes up to me and starts to admire my small change purse and wants to know where I got it from. Well then she’s off to serve someone on the other side of the bar and after that the purse draws her back and she starts lookin’ for stitchin’.

After careful examination she asks how I managed the shape without any sign of stitchin’, which she kept looking for. Well she’s off again to serve someone else before she comes around and asks if she can show the purse to the customers. Well she does that and the other customers all pick up their change and beers and move closer to Mary to see what’s she on about. Whereupon Mary asked one and all to identify any stitchin’, if they could.

There she is pulling the purse this way and that way to show that no stitchin’ is evident and she comes back to me with an ultimatum:

George, if you don’t tell me your secret, I’ll make sure that your next visit is a dry one -- - she says. Of course she was laughin’ however that is a problem that I have livin’ out here--- that you might travel all that way into the city and find the pub has no beer. But no beer for me alone, amongst all me other mates drinking, would be worse than a pub with no beer at all. I knew she was only jockin’ however, not that I have personally experienced myself mind you, but some say that women folk are hard to fathom, so I thought it wise to comply.

Well you see Missus --- as you can see, it’s made out of kangaroo hide. Now I can see the look on your face ---I didn’t shoot it purpose like. The poor thing had been around the hut for years and I used to feed it some damper and stuff, but I went out this day and the dingo’s had been at it and it was too old to fight back and it was badly injured and it looked at me as if to say --- please end it all. That’s nature Missus and it happens all the time in the bush. So I traded a mercy bullet for part of its pelt.

You ask where the stitching is but there aren’t any --- you might say it was kangaroo’s purse before it became mine. Well, Mary became rather apprehensive all of a sudden --- staring at the purse, so I thought I better enlighten her. --- Missus I said --- that there is old man kangaroo’s scrotum. Well Mary dumps the purse, unceremoniously like, in front of me and rather red faced, turned to see if more drinks required filling but she was greeted by a bar full of grinning faces. Suddenly she remembered that there was something in the kitchen that required her attention. But I can tell ya, I

wasn't her favourite boy after that. She reckoned that I should have enlightened her, on the quiet, in the first place. "

Well it was now two am (early October 1957) and the clouds had begun to thin, so I woke my booker in case we got the break we were looking for. George settled back leaning against an old messmate, bushman's squat, still adorned with ringers hat as if to me, George was expecting the sun to break through as well, --- not really --- it's just an old custom in the bush. You're not dressed without the Stetson. But things were looking a whole lot better up in the sky and I could feel that we were at last on a winner and that the observation would be effected that night. In those days and continually observing the stars, one got to know the first and second order magnitude stars off by heart, so that observations were routine and not subject to time consuming star identification computations later.

But all of a sudden there was a star of high magnitude that I did not know; that I had not seen before and I can tell you that such an apparition to one who is familiar with the celestial bodies is of much concern, if not bewilderment. Have I been out in the bush too long? Or was it a meteor ? Perhaps a nova? What else could it be? Then we noticed that its ascension was opposite to that of the stars and that it was obviously in earth orbit. Suddenly the penny dropped. The Russians had been working on a satellite and there it was --- the first sputnik; the first man made satellite in space.

Of course we tracked it through the constellations and recorded times etc but then we realised that eyes all around the world were doing the same thing. But nevertheless we were excited to see such modern technology from this remote position on earth, where except for a few minor man made infrastructure developments, such as fences and tracks and the like, had probably not changed since the European first came to this country and in the era of our first Australians, probably not changed materially at all.

To George it was something he could tell Tom about, but its consequences of future technology to man was lost to his world of cattle and his own selected domain. Still propped against his tree he pushed his hat to the back of his head and commented : --- *"Now what the hell would they want that dang thing up there for ?"*

We completed our observations satisfactorily just before dawn's gathering light faded the lesser magnitude stars from sight.

On the way back to the hut, George asked again as to the merits of that *bloomin' thing in the sky* and I must confess that although I was aware of the technical advancement that delivered it, I had then little idea of the exponential benefits that would become available to business, industry, science and particularly the geosciences, not only following on from that event, but continuing to develop both now and into the future. Mapping, whether it be for just localised benefit, or of continental or world significance, was just one major benefactor. Determining latitude and longitude from the stars is now accomplished, in relative accuracy, by a small hand held instrument, thanks to satellite orbiting positioning and orientations.

So I was able to tell George that he had just witnessed the beginnings of the space age; that there would be a lot more of *'those things in the sky'* to come. I was also able to remind him that it was only slightly less than one hundred years ago that the first surveyor and astronomer to tread this part of the country, passed not far to the west of his property.

Probably in George's father's time, wherever he then was, William John Wills, guided his leader Robert O'Hara Bourke and party from Menindee, north through the Channel Country, onto the Barkley Tableland and thence down the Cloncurry River and into the Carpentaria Basin --- just one hundred years since man had first struggled to this point to be the first to cross the country from south to north, by foot, camel and horse and had perished in the return attempt.

From that scenario, to the present as displayed this night from this equally remote location, the exciting beginnings of the space age, heralded here by the orbit around mother earth of a small sphere --- simply called by the Russians "*sputnik*" or in the English --- "*co – traveller*."

Before we left, George offered us some salt beef which we gladly accepted as he filled half a sugar bag. It lay kicking around in the jeep for sometime before we sampled it. Well it was obviously half off when George salted it and it tasted accordingly. Mind you it didn't get any worse, but it certainly didn't get any better either. Surprisingly however we found that after a while, the slightly green colour of the beef added to the flavour and in the end it became quite a delicacy and I then quite believed the word that I had heard of people of some of the continental countries, enjoying their beef half way between fresh and rotten.

George gleaned from our conversations that I collected stamps and from reports I later received, pestered any one he saw (mostly the ringers from Mt Norman outstation) with a letter, for the stamp.

George had a want to follow our progress as a matter of interest and I promised to write. When I received his replies, written in large infirm copybook style, the letters were always packed with stamps. George died in his *'City'* of Richmond in 1973. To my mind George and his ilk, second generational perhaps, still bear the badge of Pioneer.

JEFF LAMBERT

POST SCRIPT

To the best of my knowledge and in my time in the Corps, there were only two armies in the world that supported independent survey units. --- the Australian and Russian armies. The Australian Army's Royal Australian Survey Corps, formed in 1915 and disbanded as an independent entity in 1996, was tasked with mapping Australia to 1:250,000 1:100,000 and to 1:50,000 in strategic areas of tactical significance. Apart from other survey operations during both war and peace, mapping activities were also carried out in New Guinea, the South West Pacific Islands and Indonesia.

I found out years later when statistics of sputnik 1 were made available by the Russians, that the object we thought was the satellite itself, was in fact the second stage of the rocket, being the booster rocket. It went into orbit immediately following the satellite, recorded brilliance of magnitude one, whereas the satellite was of low brilliance and hardly visible to the typical naked eye at magnitude 6. Nevertheless it became the approximate pathfinder to the course of the satellite immediately in front of it. (Based upon satellite magnitude equalling star apparent magnitude formulae.)