



The pressure of time

Anthony HT Hodgkinson

We were cruising at 5000 feet, enjoying beautifully clear winter weather, just south of Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory. My friend Don and I were flying in his Cessna 182 and about to turn east and follow the Barkly Highway to a large cattle property known as “Avon Downs”. We were planning to visit an old patient — let’s call her Claire. Originally from England, she was working for the South Australian Government in the NT looking after Aboriginal children in a kindergarten.

The story began when a letter arrived from Claire asking if I would make a flying visit to her “back country” village. She heard that I had taken up private flying and had an interest in visiting the bush. My friend Don was a novice private pilot like myself, and we were both very keen to take the opportunity to test our wings on a long flight to the country.

Claire lived alone in a large caravan that could accommodate four adults. It was grouped in a large, protected area with three other similar caravans: one served as the ablution block for the children, another was for their changing and rest rooms, and the third was a large classroom where lessons were conducted. Claire was endeavouring to help with training in health and education for young Indigenous children from deprived areas.

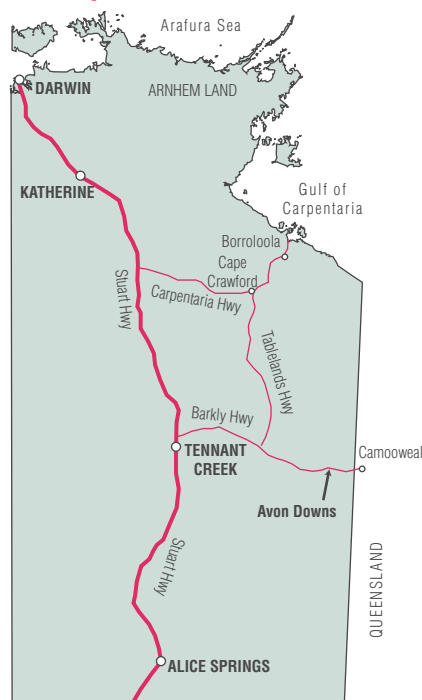
The excitement was immense as we landed in a cloud of dust on the bush airstrip. We taxied up to Claire, who was surrounded by dancing and shouting children. It was not long before we were chatting about bygone years and about how Claire was coping with the various demands while attempting to introduce Western culture into the Aboriginal community.

Claire described her disappointment with the lives of some of her former pupils — for example, girls aged 10 or 12 who, on returning to their Aboriginal communities, were allocated as wives to elders of the tribe. She was anxious to visit some of these older children, who now lived on the coast at Borroloola, about 500 km north of Avon Downs.

Why not make a flying visit to Borroloola? It was soon decided that we should. We quickly cleared the aircraft of unwanted gear so that Claire would be able to join us on the flight. We took off early the next morning and arrived at Borroloola after about two and a half hours. Claire was very excited to see her former pupils and learn about their lifestyle and activities in the years since leaving school at Avon Downs.

We spent a happy day meeting all the young mothers and their children, and the time passed very quickly. Then we suddenly remembered that the airstrip at Avon Downs did not have landing lights! We realised we had to leave quickly because the calculated flying time would only just allow us to arrive home before last light.

North-eastern region of the Northern Territory



When I turned to walk to our aircraft, I met the anxious gaze of the hospital matron: “Could you possibly help with a desperately ill little Aboriginal baby? The Flying Doctor can’t come till tomorrow and this wee child is seriously distressed and unfortunately the hospital sisters can’t help.”

I looked across to Don and Claire as I followed the matron running to the sick child’s bedside. He was seriously ill from dehydration after protracted vomiting and diarrhoea and needed an intravenous saline drip. So a small baby with collapsed veins set the challenge for time and urgency.

Naturally, my flying companions were a bit anxious about the prospect of delaying our departure. However, the nursing staff were all very grateful for my help. After some effort, the needle entered the vein of this brave little boy, who began to improve with the added fluid. I stood back with relief, which was shared by us all.

After a quick farewell we went out to the aircraft. We checked the seatbelts, oil and fuel, then warmed up the engine and leapt into the air on track for Avon Downs. We checked our calculation on the time for last light for Avon Downs with a radio call to Mt

Isa traffic control. Our calculations were correct — we would be 25 minutes late for last light on arrival!

There were no options at this stage, so we pressed on, hoping the last light of the sunset on the flat landscape would give us sufficient vision.

But look!

What was that unusual glow ahead on the track near the horizon? That must be close to the Avon Downs airstrip!

As we flew nearer to this bright area, while the natural light was failing rapidly, we saw we were being welcomed by numerous cars that had their headlights lighting up the airstrip to guide our return. It seemed the hospital staff from Borroloola had called the folk at Avon Downs and told them about our problem and why we had a delayed departure.

Claire was sad to say goodbye to us but, happily, she wrote to say what fun our visit had been and that the little boy had recovered and was doing well.

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