

Persistence Earns Its Own Rewards.

Darwin correspondent Brian Johnstone's exclusive interview with the victim of a crocodile attack in the Kakadu National Park earned him worldwide bylines in March. It was a fitting reward for his determination and resourcefulness.

The victim, Val Plumwood, a Sydney university lecturer, was taken to Darwin Hospital after suffering horrific injuries in the attack, and it immediately became clear that the staff intended to protect her from the media.

Brian takes up the story: "The day she was brought into Darwin, I was informed bluntly by the medical superintendent that it would be at least four days before she would be able to see anyone. I later found out the reason... most major newspapers in Australia, many dangling cheques, were chasing the exclusive interview and had jammed the hospital switchboard on several occasions.

"I called again three days later and was told she might be available in a few day's time. I asked if I might speak to her by telephone. The prompt reply was 'No way'. I was then told the hospital authorities would schedule a series of interviews with individual reporters at a scheduled time and was instructed to wait until I was given the nod. I decided that while the hospital could forbid telephone contact they could not stop mail to patients. So I wrote Val a letter and pointed out what the hospital authorities intended to do regarding media access.

"I suggested at that stage of her convalescence she might not feel up to reliving the horror of the croc attack for a procession of reporters. I pointed out that an initial interview with AAP would afford her the opportunity of getting her story out to almost everyone at the same time and would relieve the pressure on her.

"She told me the hospital authorities passed on the letter - 24 hours after I dropped it in. Val later told me she was taken by the sympathetic

tone of the letter and the accuracy of AAP reports she had read of her plight released through national park rangers. She decided to grant us an interview but the medical superintendent told her he would not allow this as it froze out other media organisations.

"She got word to me via a friend who had visited her. We both insisted from opposite sides of the hospital ward door and I was finally allowed in to see her in mask and gown. I visited her on a number of occasions and she told me she was delighted with the story."

After nine years with AAP in Sydney, Adelaide and Darwin, Brian is leaving to take up an appointment as press secretary with the Northern Territory Government.

His successor is Richard Pullin from the Adelaide bureau.

Richard first joined AAP back in 1977 when he spent three months as a part-time messenger delivering overseas economic news bulletins while studying for an honours degree in Psychology at Melbourne University.

He spent 10 months full time with AAP-Reuters after graduating before taking up a cadetship at the Melbourne Bureau in late 1981.

He joined the Adelaide bureau in 1983.

Interviewing Orangutans.

AAP Jakarta correspondent Leigh Mackay set new standards in the creative art of claiming expenses after a trip to Sumatra "assessing Moslem revolts, interviewing orangutans, sidestepping one-tusked albino elephants enraged at the presence of LNG plants on their traditional jungle trails, and inspecting Goodyear's rubber trees."

"However," said Leigh's note, "I can assure you the attached account

is anything but rubbery."

The claim was approved.

Orangutans, aside, the in-depth interview has been an impressive feature of Leigh's Jakarta tenure. His interview with Australian Ambassador Rawdon Dalrymple in March was run in the Melbourne Herald and Sun, The Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald, among many others.

Leigh says there's a long list of interviews he hasn't done "owing to the reluctance of candidates (ah, the familiar stifled gasp at other end of the phone when I give my nationality)." But the successes include (with Leigh's comments):

Foreign Minister Dr Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, several times, on East Timor, Australian-Indonesian relations, Irian Jaya-PNG border squabbles, ASEAN and Kampuchea. "Always affable but being a professor of law, he weighs every word. Has promised me a free lunch if I ever get him to say what he'd rather not say."

East Timor's Governor Mario Carrascalao (thrice, once in Dili, twice in Jakarta). Fond of Australia where his mother and family live.

East Timor's outspoken, Portuguese-trained Apostolic Administrator, Monsignor Carlos Belo. He spoke passionately on the plight of the East Timorese and the need for international attention.

Rabbie Namaliu, until recently PNG Foreign Minister, on Indonesian-PNG troubles and the political consequences of rebel OPM movement.

Irian Jaya's locally-born Governor Izaak Hindom in Jayapura on his vision of total integration with Indonesia.

Irian Jaya's military commander Brig. Gen. Sembiring Meliala (in Jayapura) on Indonesia's impatience with PNG for allowing OPM sanctuary on its soil.

Less sensitively, Indonesia's

Minister for Industries, Hartarto, on hopes for Australian investment and economic development in his country, and Director of Tourism, Joop Ave, on his vision of converting Bali from hippie playground to Bermuda-style resort for the well-heeled.

Exclusive.

London's Howard Northey scooped his rivals covering the Wallabies rugby tour with an exclusive interview with Mark Ella on his retirement.

Ella had promised the story to Howard when he was ready to announce he was quitting the game and, true to his word, granted several hours of interviews.

The story was released shortly after Ella boarded a plane for Australia, ensuring he was out of contact for around 24 hours before he landed to a barrage of Press in Sydney.

En Garde.

This one got past the Associated Press subs in New York:

KUALA LUMPUR (AP) – Wild white men and women of a primitive tribe in the jungles of East Malaysia swing from tree to tree and hunt wild animals with wooden spears and wooden clubs, the New Straits Times reported Monday.

New Straits Times reporter Nora Marzuki, who visited the tribe accompanied by anthropologist Jacob Maxwell, wrote in her article that the tribesmen spoke broken English and wore only animal skins on a few parts of their bodies. Marzuki said she tried to teach them to sing "I Just Called To Say I Love You", but they could not manage it. But she said they love to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star", a nursery rhyme she taught them.

In Sydney, Hugo Uribe was the somewhat bleary-eyed but ever alert overnight Chief Sub on the AAP World Desk. He twiggled straight away and fired off the following to AP:

020535 – Re your tribe story ex Kuala Lumpur. Sounds pretty much like another white tribe discovered around same day two years ago. Used to sing "April Showers" and

"What Kind Of Fool Am I". Pausing just long enough for their faces to turn scarlet and query their KL bureau, the AP killed the story from its world wires with the following:

"BULLETIN ELIMINATOR"

Kuala Lumpur – Eliminate the Malaysia-primitive tribe story. The newspaper says the article is an April Fool's Day joke.

"The AP."

Brussels Sprouts MX Crisis.

Brussels is familiar territory for Canberra Bureau Chief Bruce Jones who, during a previous London posting, regularly visited the Belgian capital to cover visits by Australian Trade Ministers and deliberations by the EC Council of Ministers.

But in February he was there with Prime Minister Bob Hawke as part of a tour of Europe and the United States. Soon after their arrival it became apparent that for a change, defence and foreign policy – not sheepmeat and EC export subsidies – would be to the forefront as rumblings emerged from Canberra over a decision to allow US aircraft monitoring MX missile splashdowns in the Tasman Sea to use facilities at Sydney's Richmond RAAF base.

Hawke's controversial, unilateral decision in Brussels to reverse

Australia's agreement to assist in the MX tests is now history.

Despite this and other embarrassments on the trip, Bruce says Hawke was able to claim, justifiably, that the visit was a success, backed up by President Reagan's remarks after a fireside chat in the Oval Office that the alliance between Australia and the United States remained "very sound and very solid."

Bruce says there were some lighter moments. "Press are allowed into the Oval Office in large groups to witness, photograph and film the beginning of such talks, and the similarity to cattle being herded is not lost on White House hands who 'moo' loudly and generally carry on as if they were extras in an episode of 'Rawhide'.

"Hawke made great play of the 'warmth and friendship' extended to him by the President, and in a departure statement during a ceremonial farewell outside the White House (the sort of thing familiar to readers of the Doonesbury comic strip) concluded by saying that he looked forward to continued meetings with President 'down under'.

This was greeted by a shout by a member of the irreverent White House Press corp who wanted to know whether Mr Hawke was inviting Reagan to visit Australia, or merely referring to the President's "advanced age."

Trials and Tribulations in Ireland.

During five months covering the ill-fated extradition proceedings against Australia's most wanted man, Mark . . . Lever of the London Bureau, crossed the Irish Sea at least 10 times. His major headache throughout was the fact that Ireland has few public phones and even fewer that work.

He had found one tucked away out of sight in a corner in the Dublin Court complex and managed to keep it to himself, which gave AAP the edge on several occasions.

On the day the court announced it was to free Robert Trimbole, Mark rushed to his 'secret' phone only to find Trimbole's lawyer using it.

The lawyer was phoning the news to Trimbole's family and allowed Mark, who was hovering agitatedly nearby, to

use the quotes from the conversation.

As the court hearings proceeded into March, the coverage became ever tenser for Mark.

When back in London, he was also covering the McClelland Royal Commission into the British atomic weapons tests, a job requiring full day attendances at the hearing room.

At the same time, Mark's wife Anna was expecting their second child. Fortunately, Nicholas Lever was born during a break in the Trimbole proceedings and on a quiet Royal Commission week, so Mark was able to get in some quick nappy practice before heading for Dublin and the end of the Trimbole saga, which culminated in the man's disappearance yet again.