

## Getting Through is Half the Fun.

Steve Dettre from the London office had an uphill battle against Soviet red tape and telephones during his 10 days in Minsk in August covering the FIFA World Soccer Cup.

"Sometimes I had to argue, cajole, plead, sweet-talk and bribe people for hours to get a line to Sydney or London," Steve said.

There was no direct dial facility, no reverse charge calls and astronomical rates of \$15 a minute to London and \$23 a minute to Sydney.

In the end, FIFA rep Heinz Narozcky came to the rescue.

"What he did was later described by Australian Embassy Counsel, Peter Reilly, as a 'three-day miracle'", Steve said. "He got us reverse charge calls — something Mr Reilly said even the Australian Embassy couldn't achieve for itself".

Getting Steve's dialup transmitter to work on the Soviet telephone system was another matter.

"Whenever I think of Minsk", he said, "I think of the hours I spent in telephone booths staring at that little yellow dial-up light, praying, pleading with it, daring it to go out.

"I got very odd looks from people who saw me sitting in the booth staring at this little machine and talking and shaking my fist at it.

"The Australian media caused a real stir with the Soviets because we actually asked questions at the press conference. Many times officials would say in casual conversation, things like 'you ask a lot of questions'.

"An article about us appeared in the Byelorussian Physical Culture newspaper entitled "What's the next question?" and there was another article about the hard-pressed telephone girls who had to deal with the crazy Aussies — it was headlined 'Hello Sydney' which was what I yelled out when Sydney

switchgirls Deidre Papps or Leonie Price answered the phone".

All eight of the Australian media contingent had a 'minder', who followed them as soon as they left the press centre or their hotel.

"It was quite exciting at first, but you soon treated it as normal. If I crossed a road and my minder got caught at the lights, I even waited for him to catch up".

"On my last night in Minsk, after the Young Socceroos were knocked out, I was invited by my minder Alexei (officially an interpreter at the press centre) to a typical Byelorussian Taverna".

"A girl singer with a beautiful voice sang sad songs and everyone was weeping in their glasses; I even noticed a tear in Alexei's eye."

## Bad News Puts Champers on Ice.

Sydney's Tony Vermeer covered the troubled launch of the first domestic satellite in August from the vantage point of the AUSSAT ground station in the northern suburb of Belrose, working late at night and through the early hours.

The launch of AUSSAT 1 aboard the space shuttle Discovery was four days late after being twice postponed because of bad weather and other problems.

Despite the initial setback, there was a confident mood at Belrose as reporters filed 'good news' stories and AUSSAT employees and assorted dignitaries departed for a celebratory party.

However, Tony decided to wait half an hour longer for a satellite check which he had been assured was "just routine".

It was then NASA began discover-

ing evidence of a malfunction which indicated our satellite might have been damaged and its deployment possibly would have to be aborted.

As Tony recalls: "We were listening to these slightly agitated NASA voices when an AUSSAT man happily poked his head around the corner and said "Come on you guys, how about a glass of champagne".

"When we told him he'd better put it on ice because there was a problem, his chin just about hit the floor."

Within a few minutes, the party was cancelled and an hour later the station was teeming with worried executives.

Stories needed to be filed every hour, as shuttle astronauts, mission control and AUSSAT technicians worked on a remarkable rescue.

Throughout the night, a lone bottle of champers stood in an ice bucket on the reception desk, uncorked, forlorn and undrunk.

When the satellite was put into orbit 24 hours early, unaffected by its ordeal, the AUSSAT people broke open more bottles.

## Pash of the Outback.

Flies, dogs and lizards were part of the proceedings when the Maralinga Royal Commission, accompanied by Adelaide Bureau Chief Chris Pash, made a 17-day tour of the outback.

The first leg was to the far north of South Australia, where the participants dubbed the hearing "The Aeroguard Royal Commission".

Royal Commissioner "Diamond" Jim McClelland insisted on going directly to the local aborigines and conducting hearings sitting cross-legged on the red dirt.

A constant arm-waving motion became automatic to ward off the



clouds of sticky bush flies while hearing evidence from aborigines about the black mist said to have been formed by an atomic test at Emu in 1953.

"Contempt charges were brought against a dog and a lizard", Chris says.

"A dog relieved itself near Diamond Jim and the lizard ran into the centre of the hearing and refused to leave the Court".

At the Marla Roadhouse, centre of the Royal Commission's operations, the media were dumped out the back in transportable tin boxes while barristers, commission staff and Pitjantjatjara council members were installed in new luxury motel rooms.

The accommodation arrangements were a sore point between the media and the Commission secretariat until the base of operations changed from Marla to Ceduna on the coast where it was rumoured there were not enough hotel rooms to go around.

The media plane's pilot pulled out the throttle and got to Ceduna ahead of the legal mafia, enabling the journalists to secure the best rooms.

When Chris arrived at the hotel, the receptionist said "Ah, yes, the Press. Who is sharing a room with whom?"

"No," said Chris, deadpan. "The group on the second plane will be bunking together."

The Royal Commission went to Australia to inspect the Monte Bello islands off the north west where the British tested their first atomic bomb on Australian soil.

"The islands are still radioactive, but a scientist said we would have to camp on the islands for 12 months to get a harmful dose of radiation," Chris said.

Diamond Jim remarked, "Don't worry, we'll probably only be sterile for a few days."

## Pekka Picked the Right Time.

Sydney's Pekka Paavonpera spent three weeks on roving assignment in South Africa during June and July and it turned out to be a case of being in the right place at the right time.

The original priority was to follow up the announcement of the rebel Australian cricket tour, but Pekka arrived at the time of escalating racial tensions and with the fate of the All Black Rugby Tour in the balance.

Pekka said preparation for the trip was difficult because black activists in Australia are invariably banned in South Africa and to glean contacts from them could have put both parties in jeopardy.

Instead, he successfully developed contacts as he went.



*Pekka Paavonpera*

He met, among others, Winnie Mandela, wife of jailed ANC leader, Nelson Mandela; Steve Biko's widow; Peter Jones — the man who was arrested with Steve Biko and who was the last outsider to see him before his death; representatives from AZAPO and UDF; Beyers Naude, General Secretary of the African Council of Churches; and leaders of the South African Cricket Union and Rugby Board.

When a New Zealand High Court Judge effectively banned the All Black tour, Pekka broke the news to Danie Craven, the South African rugby supremo, in a late night phone call.

Craven, with whom Pekka had earlier had a face-to-face interview, was shattered by the news, and his emotional reaction was a scoop for AAP.

Pekka says the assignment was not without dark undercurrents. Telephone lines frequently went dead mid-conversation, people failed to turn up for appointments and his first attempts to visit Winnie Mandela were thwarted by what he later found out to be a government security agent masquerading as a black journalist and a go-between for Mandela and the American Consulate.

## From the Land of the Lange White Cloud.

AAP's Wellington office has had little time to celebrate its fourth anniversary (November 85) as the stories which have kept New Zealand on the front pages continued to come thick and fast.

The Kiwi year has been dominated by stories of international significance: the continuing dispute with the US over warship visits, the court order effectively cancelling the All Black rugby tour to South Africa and, of course, the Rainbow Warrior affair.

Most of the running on those stories was made from Wellington, with Prime Minister David Lange was a key figure in all three. Lange may not be everyone's cup of tea, but for a journalist in need of a swift, colourful comment he is hard to beat.

Among his most quotable this year were his likening of the country's rugby administrators to all-in wrestlers, his declaration that the Rainbow Warrior bombing was "a sordid act of international state-backed terrorism" and his glib (and regretted) quip that former defence chiefs who criticised his anti-nuke policies were a bunch of "geriatric generals".

Connoisseurs of the bizarre found the Rainbow Warrior affair irresistible. Perhaps the weirdest twist of all came when it was revealed the "Turenge" couple spent the night before the bombing in Lange's family holiday home, which Lange's agent had unwittingly rented out to the two French spies.

As well as keeping track of the big three stories, John managed to cover the South Pacific forum in Rarotonga, calling at Tahiti on the way and teeing up an exclusive interview with French Polynesia President Gaston Flosse.

While in Rarotonga he reported the signing of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty and also interviewed Kiribati President Jeremia Tabai on that country's controversial decision to grant fishing rights to the Soviet Union.