

Jim's Coup

On Thursday, May 14, Suva correspondent Jim Shrimpton stunned the world with the news of the military coup in Fiji.

For most of that first day, he was the only journalist able to file the story out of the country. The military had cut off all outside telephone and telex links — but not AAP's leased cable between Sydney and Suva, on which Jim files back to us, punching out his copy on an antique teleprinter.

As News Editor Les Murphy put it in a message to Jim on the day: "What a better way to spend the 25th anniversary as AAP correspondent than with the best story in world at moment, and you with it all to yourself."

Jim was joined the following night by Wellington correspondent Geoff Spencer (his flight had been delayed about 24 hours by airline union bans in New Zealand). The first foreign journalist to fly in after the coup arrived at 9.15 pm the previous evening. By the end of the first week, well over 100 others had jetted in.

The coup came as a complete surprise, and Jim had to work fast, using a good reporter's essential baggage — good contacts, and a large slice of luck. A week later, Jim could still recall vividly what happened:

"The coup broke on the stroke of ten on the Parliament Building's clock. That's when Colonel Rabuka and his men walked into the Chamber and kidnapped the government. I drove past the government buildings at about 10.20.

"Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. There was an army truck outside, but that's not unusual. The army plays football in the park next door.

"I went down town, did a bit of business and then went into the Sugar Growers Council Office to complain that they had failed to send me a press release the day before about a drought in the cane fields in the west.

"The head office girl (who I've played golf with) said: "What are you doing here, why aren't you down the Parliament?"

"I asked her what was going on.

"Oh," she said, "Colonel Rabuka's taken over the government in a military coup."

"Look," I said, "This isn't April 1st. That was six weeks ago."

She assured me she wasn't fooling and suggested I ask the Chairman of the Sugar Growers Council, who was listening to the radio with some of his staff.

"They confirmed the coup, and I shot off from the SGC office to the government buildings about 1000 metres away, which I reckon I did in about 2 minutes 38.5 seconds — probably a world record for that

particular distance.

"I went to the Ministry of Information, normally a calm place where they type out press releases about sugar access roads near Lautoka and stuff like that, which I pick up religiously every day.

The department head said: "Look we're under military rule. This is a one paragraph statement we have for you. I can tell you nothing else under military law."

I said: "What happened?" "I'm sorry," he said. And then, out of the corner of his mouth, he added: "Phone up Sam Thompson."

"Sam Thompson's a Fijian reporter on a commercial radio station. I grabbed a cab home, sent a snap, and phoned Sam. He was at the press gallery at the time and gave me a good description of what exactly happened."

As a lone correspondent, faced with a supreme world story, Jim had to make instinctive decisions on how to proceed and whom to contact.

"The Australian High Com-



missioner was not on the top of my list. Down at the Information Ministry within half an hour of the coup, I was faced with one of those awful situations which journalists face in thousands of similar cases around the world — I've got a superb story. Do I hang around here and interview the parliamentary guards, members of parliament or do I get the hell home and send it? — I mean I could have spent the next four hours there gathering great interviews and come back and written a nice leisurely story but I had to make that decision. Go home and send it — which I did and I then picked it up off phone and radio."

Jim said that the very antiquity of his communications worked for us on this occasion.

"If I'd been relying on a Tandy and a telephone I'd still be waiting because the phones were all cut and we couldn't get anybody. The reason I don't use a Tandy is that plugs aren't the same, the line quality is awful and mainly there's no ISD. You have to go through an international operator and there are about four for the whole country and I'd say on the average it takes 90 minutes to two hours to raise the international operator with any call.

"We had some trouble — we ran out of tapes and paper rolls because I was getting quite low and the shop that sells them to me completely ran out and like many places in Fiji many stores — even food stores — never order another supply of anything until they run out. The biggest department store in Fiji runs out of rice. They haven't ordered any of that. They wait until they run out, then he orders some more and we get it two weeks later. In the meantime, no rice. It's the same with printer rolls."

While Jim was cutting tapes, making phone calls and listening to the radio, his wife Val rushed home and supplied him with beer and sandwiches. She also helped out taking copy throughout the crisis.

PLAN:

When Geoff arrived, he and Jim sat down and worked out a plan of operations. It was decided that Geoff would stay at the Travelodge, just across the street from the government buildings. Jim mostly

remained at base, next to the teleprinter and the radio.

"We thought that was a better idea, being in different places, than the two of us spending all our time here. If Geoff got something urgent, he'd phone me. I'd take a quick note or Val would take a quick note, and I'd file it. Then he'd come back and fill it in.

Jim spent about half his time at base. When he went out, he wanted to be seen as a local, keeping his distance from the foreign media and the problems they were getting themselves into with the military, who were understandably on edge.

"I've been going out with my local Fiji Golf Club shirt on or my Fiji Bitter shirt or my Pacific scene shirt. When I'm asked to produce my special overseas journo tour pass, I don't. I produce my regular local parliamentary pass."

DETACHED:

Jim said he also felt it was important to remain a detached observer and avoid being arrested — in contrast to the apparent attitude of some foreign journalists.

"There was one demonstration when trucks, five abreast, literally forced people back down the road. Now other journalists, I won't mention any names, were right in the middle of that when they sat down in the middle of the road and refused to move. Several journoes were sitting down there with their tape recorders and note books and talking to people and this is why the soldiers, who are very toey and nervous, would snatch their tape recorders and notebooks and the journoes would protest. They were getting too close to the action. They were getting inside the action. We were keeping detached from the whole thing. I keep my distance. I'm not going to risk getting arrested. I don't want to get arrested."

The advantage of being a local often paid off. To quote one example:

"The last thing I said when I left the Ministry of Information just after the coup was: "Who the hell is Colonel Rabuka? — Have you got a CV on him." When I was half way out the door, a Fijian called Eliko, who is a very good friend, said: "Hang on a minute — six years ago this guy got an OBE Military for his

services in Lebanon. I'm sure we've got something on that." Within a minute I had, in my hand, a 400-word biography with quotes from the Colonel.

Now that was on the wire within two hours of the coup. I challenge anyone to get a profile of an unknown that quick. But that was just sheer luck. Just thanks to the helpful guy at the Information Department."

Another instance was during the hijacking at Nadi airport, when Jim got an open line to the control tower and a blow by blow account of the drama.

And again, when Jim approached the Chief Justice, Sir Timoci Tuivaga, for comment on a report that he'd been arrested. Sir Timoci replied: "Well, put it this way, Jim — I'm just off to play golf. Can I give you a lift?"

Jim said modestly that he had a "hollow scoop" immediately after the coup, because he was the first and only fulltime foreign correspondent in Fiji at the time.

"It really read well and I think if I'd had more time to do it, if I'd been able to sit down and spend four hours composing the first day's traffic, I don't think I'd have done as good a job. I think possibly you can thank the experience of nine Olympic and Commonwealth games for working long hours and writing quickly. And getting it right."

FOOTNOTE:

Jim sent the following message to Les Murphy the day after the coup: "Passing thought: wouldn't it have been super if I'd taken that Navy trip to Tuvalu? At the time of the coup, I'd have been on an outer island in the most isolated country in the world... Cheers AAP SUVA."

About six weeks before the coup, Jim had been offered a place on a RAN ship going from Fiji to one of Tuvalu's outer islands. Les said yes in principle, it seemed like a good feature trip, but let's wait and see closer to the time.

They later decided it was too soon after the Fiji election with parliament due to sit.

So Jim stayed in Suva. And as one Australian newspaper editor told us later, we couldn't have had a better man there at the time.