

What a saga. I am writing to you from Adelaide having hitched several rides back from the Northern Territory. The truck is parked outside a truck stop at Kulgera, some 400 kilometres south of Alice Springs. At some point there will be news that the road is open again and I will pick up where I left off.

I left Canberra on Sunday February 6 and drove the truck loaded with aid to Bairnsdale in Victoria where the students of the Bairnsdale Secondary School had collected educational materials for the Community First truck. That was a real buzz. I got to stay with two very inspirational teachers, Virginia King and Bob Carter and took the truck to the school where the young people loaded their collection and I talked to the year sevens about Timor. On to Melbourne in the heat, picking up a Timorese man and further supplies. The Timorese comrade had not been home since he was eight, his father having been killed in the civil war leading up to the Indonesian invasion. Since then he and his brothers and sisters had lived in Lisbon and then Melbourne. Finding the way out of Melbourne to the Great Western Highway was a nightmare, heat traffic, a gear selector determined to rebel and the truck running rough. Worse to come. Half way to Adelaide on Monday the exhaust noise increased dramatically. My friend and I resorted to stuffing our ears with pieces of paper and pushed on. We came down the Adelaide Hills at 2.30 in the morning and the whole city must have heard us. Broke and broken I contacted some old friends, being an old South Australian myself. My friends responded magnificently and soon we had the truck fitted with a set of exhaust extractors and had sufficient money for fuel to get us on our way. We had lost nearly 2 days out of a very tight schedule. The plan was that we had to be in Darwin by the 11th or 12th at the latest for loading onto HMAS Jervis Bay and then on to Dili.

Just south of the Northern Territory border the truck was running rough again and this time the problem turned out to be contaminated fuel. Fuel lines cleaned at Marla Bore we continued on through ever-heavier rain to Kulgera just over the border with the NT. And that's where we stopped, roads flooded in front and behind. There were heaps of heavy vehicles stranded and lots of tourist coaches. All available accommodation occupied. My travelling companion slept on top of the load in the truck on a thin mattress on a perilous angle and I settled for the front verandah of the police station. Hope of meeting the ship was rapidly waning. I got a lift up to the next town, Eriksdal to have a look at the road, which had reportedly been badly damaged by the waters. Sure enough, the left-hand side of the road had lost all support and concealed a freshly dug cave several metres deep and wide.

We had no hope of getting to Darwin on time. Reluctantly my companion decided to leave the truck and catch a Greyhound bus back to Adelaide. From there he would fly to Darwin to meet the boat deadline. I would stay and wait for the road to open. I was determined to sit it out even if it took a week, however, when I heard the police telling some truckies the road may be closed for up to 3 weeks my resolution dissolved in the pouring rain. Hence back to Adelaide to wait in relative comfort

It is now Friday and nearly 2 weeks after the Community First truck left Canberra for Darwin. How long will the wait be? I can't answer that but I am anxious to get back on the road. No doubt there will be further difficulties to be circumvented before the aid reaches its destination. 400 Kilometres to Alice Springs and then a further 1,000 to Darwin in Monsoon season. I will keep in touch.

Regards,

Peter O'Dea,

Convenor

Community First.

Friday February 18 2000