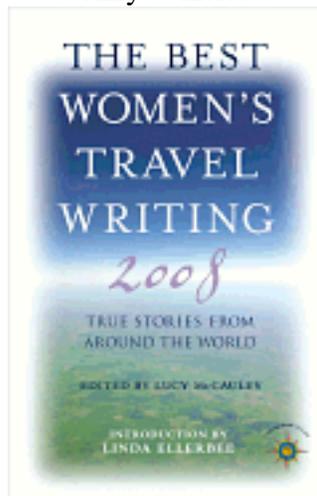


Only One Photo Sonny Whitelaw



The trials and tribulations of working as a photojournalist in the South Pacific.

“Now we’re really in trouble!” muttered my driver, a lanky ni-Vanuatu, native to the island of Tanna, Vanuatu.

I thought he was joking. I really didn’t believe the torch batteries had died and we were stuck on the side of a crumbling cliff in the middle of the bush, in the wee hours of a wind swept coal black night with neither spare torch, battery nor match between us.

“Sorry missus. No joke.”

It had been a bad night for batteries. In fact it had been a bad day, period.

Like most things, it began simply enough. A printer in Singapore had lost my photograph of a young girl taken during the famous Toka ceremony’s Women’s Dance. I had more or less risked life, limb and what remains of my long since shredded virtue to get the photo, by weaving through over a thousand adrenaline-hyped virtually naked Tannese males indulging in what can only loosely be described as a dance. After suffering more than just bruises in all the wrong places, I was almightily peeved when the publisher sent the bland apology and request for just one replacement photo. That couldn’t be much trouble, could it?

A few days later, a friend and fellow photographer suggested we go to a major circumcision ceremony being held on Tanna Island. It wasn’t a Toka—they only happen every few years—but I’d get some good portraits.

So we flew down to Tanna in a mad rush, spent the day being broiled by the sun on the ash plains around Yasur volcano (guess who forgot the sun cream). I lost a tripod into the bowels of the earth following a particularly violent eruption (I should know better, that’s the second time that’s happened) and later wrote off a couple of lenses when we were showered in a particularly nasty sulphurous ash rain. Finally, at

about 3am we conceded we had become totally lost on the craggy slopes of the volcano while vainly searching for our 'taxi' driver, who had long since given up and gone home.

By the time we arrived in the village, my companion had come down with malaria, so I spent the day scraping caked ash from cameras and fetching countless half coconut shells of water from a nearby creek for my fevered fellow photographer.

So much for the photos.

This same photographer arrived on my doorstep a week later with enthusiastic tales of a huge Yam ceremony on Tanna. I agreed to go on the condition he took a very large bottle of chloroquine tablets. Exactly seven minutes before boarding, my companion opened his hastily collected mail, took one look at a bill, grabbed his bags and rushed out of the airport. Two hours later I stood in the middle of the Tannese village talking to an old chief.

"Yam ceremony, oh yes!" he said with a toothless smile. "Yes, definitely this month!"

Never travel with French photographers who get malaria and nasty bills in the mail.

However, being a Friday and being Tanna, there was a reasonable chance of finding a traditional ceremony and dance, *somewhere*. All I had to do was wander around the only town, Lenakel, and ask enough people. With a bit of luck...

Sure enough, I learned that a circumcision ceremony was taking place, '*long way tumas*.' How far? Two hours by 4-wheel drive. Now functioning 4-wheel drives are hard to come by on Tanna, but with a bit of patience... Though there was another condition. The owner had to have no fear of heights.

Everyone on Tanna who owns a vehicle seems to make a point of passing Lenakel at least once a day. So, soon enough, someone was dragooned into taking me to the village — but he had to return to Lenakel before dark. No way was he going to negotiate *that* road at night.

All went well. Much to my surprise we did not fall off the side of the cliff on the way to the village. It didn't rain, despite the glowering thunderclouds and even the mosquitoes were almost reasonable (you guessed it, I forgot the Aerogard). But I didn't get shots of the semi-controlled riot loosely referred to as 'dancing' that would begin at sunset. No amount of money would convince my driver to hang around until after dark. Coming back down the hill, I can't say I blamed him. I couldn't have risked staying there without guaranteed return transport as I might have been stuck for days. But I was determined to get the shots.

By sheer chance, wandering past Lenakel at 6pm, I stumbled across the same driver who had taken my French photographer pal and I under wing ten days previously. His utility looked ten years older and wasn't a 4-wheel drive, but he assured me he knew a short cut and that we would make it.

We didn't.

Half way along the same road I'd taken that afternoon, my driver stopped and three Tannese women in custom dress and face paint headed to the same village, climbed into the back of the ute. They would, he told me cheerfully, act as ballast. Fine, no problem, nothing like being prepared.

I must, admit the journey wasn't nearly so bad at night. It was far too dark to see the crumbling cliffs dropping off into oblivion on my side of the ute. True, there were a few nervous moments when I felt the rear axle sliding over the edge, but I'm sure it was just my imagination, even though the women in the back scrambled shrieking over to the opposite side of the utility tray.

When we crossed over the same boulder strewn creek bed as I'd traversed twice that day, I began to have my suspicions about this short cut. But then we turned off into a black hole in the jungle and my faith in my driver returned—for about five minutes. We hit another boulder-strewn river, this time with water. I know it was water because it came up around my thighs through the holes in the floorboards. (To be truthful, they were not holes so much as the gaps between the narrow planks where I rested my feet.) Then, as we roared up the sixty-degree slope on the far side, the utility — justifiably I feel — stalled. It would not start again. My driver made absolutely certain of this by flattening the battery.

No problem, we'll follow the 'road' to the village. So what if the torch dies about the same time as we realise we're on a goat track, because it suddenly drops two thousand feet into nowhere? Why worry? I was with four Tannese who knew the jungle backward!

"Now we're really in trouble," says my driver.

We squatted on the track. Somewhere, in one direction, there was this cliff dropping into oblivion, but with a thick, overcast sky it was impossible to see where. In fact I think it is safe to say that I have never seen such total blackness in my entire life.

Have you ever been in Jenolan Caves in NSW, and the guide turns the torch off and says we'll suffer sensory deprivation and madness unless she turns the light back on? Well it was darker than that and I had no problem with the mad bit, I was already there.

Still, of one thing I could be absolutely certain; four sets of eyes were staring intently at me.

No one was willing to walk around and establish which way was down — the track, I mean, not via free fall. Then it began to rain. Not much, at first, but enough to establish the 'track' was probably a creek bed that would no doubt turn into the top bit of a waterfall. You know, the bit that crumbles away at the edge during really heavy downpours? That might sound unlikely, but around the volcano the topsoil is uncompressed ash. Mudslides from tropical downpours have buried entire villages on Tanna. Lot of people have died.

Feeling duty bound to come up with a solution, I recalled seeing a small fire about two hundred metres back. Actually, it wasn't a fire so much as a particularly vigorous chunk of lava that had shot out of the nearby volcano. If I could figure out which direction was back... In a sudden inspiration, brought on by me trying to protect my now sodden camera bag, I grabbed one of my trusty Nikon flashes. It fires off at about 1/10,000th of a second, but that's enough to give some sense of direction, allowing us to stumble down the gully-come-goat-track-come-potential waterfall, find the fire and light a torch of coconut leaves. Now that all sounds amazingly simple when you read it, but believe me, it wasn't.

Still, several 'AA' batteries and an hour later, we found the by now soggy fire under the semi-frozen chunk of lava. And lo! What should we see but another goat track. Ah ha. The Short Cut!

Twenty minutes later we arrived at the village. Alas, most of the dancers were not in traditional garb — it was mid-winter and they were cold. I was cold too, frozen stiff in fact from the river and rainwater. However I soon discovered that mud provides surprisingly good insulation. As to the eventual fate of my driver, his truck and the female ballast, I confess I have no idea. I paid him the agreed sum and hitched a ride back with the only other truck to reach the village — by a different route — that night.

There was a message from the printer waiting for me on return, wondering when I was sending the shot. Then the phone rang. It was my photographer mate. I went to hang up when he accused me of lacking a sense of humour, and that the Yam ceremony was on Friday.

It should be simple. I mean; I only need one photo.