

# Travels of an Engineer

“I WAS THERE”—PART II BY H. M. BURROWS

“WHAT THE hell have you done to be sent to Bathurst?” a fellow passenger asked me, “In strict confidence, of course.”

We caught our first glimpse of it just after sunrise as the mist lifted. I shall always remember Quick’s exclamation, “My God, old man, look what we’ve struck now!”

A few iron-roofed white-washed buildings, a few clusters of palm-trees in an expanse of sand, a small wooden jetty, bunches of sweating natives handling cargo. They’d push a case a few yards and then squat, some would just squat. All chattered and gesticulated nonstop.

By 9 a.m. the heat seemed to fall down on you; intense, enveloping heat.

The station, seven miles through bush and mangrove swamp from the little white settlement, consisted of two large mosquito-proofed cages arising out of a desert sand, scrub and anthills and lacking any trees or shade.

At first we were afraid we would not live the twelve months we were supposed to be there. After a few weeks we were afraid we would.

First impressions were very vivid and have lasted. Light, colour and prolific growth. Roadside grass growing up through telephone lines. Parts of the bush a carpet of wild flowers, strange birds of brilliant colours startled a troop of monkeys which swarmed up the nearby trees and screamed at us. Land crabs scuttling off into the bush, loathsome

*The author with a local headman and some of his wives and children*





*Landing wireless stores from a lighter for Bathurst station in 1916. The masts can just be seen*

things with that awful large extra claw on one side. Vultures rising heavily from a carcass gorged, blood dripping from their beaks.

We arrived in the rainy season and had a tornado the first night. A whirling tempest and a deluge which blew through the mosquito wire and soaked everything. The cage seemed to bend under the pressure and there was an occasional thud as a dislodged rotten palm branch was whirled against it. Clothes, shoes and bedding had to go out into the sun every few days to ward off the mildew and fungus that would otherwise form in less than a week.

Clad in shorts and sandals you would sit in a part of the cage you called "Office", the papers on the desk sticking to your arms, and your body at times smelling like a lamp wick from the paraffin with which you had oiled yourself to keep off the minute sandflies which got through the mosquito wire.

Land lines through bush and swamp connected us to the cable station in Bathurst. Breakages were frequent due to wind or monkeys. We devised a test which would often give the approximate

location of the break; although it often meant crawling over mangrove roots and slime with the accompaniment of mosquitoes and stench, but even so there was keen competition among all those off duty to join the repair party who restored contact. It was a diversion from the monotony of just work and sleep.

Swamps bordering the site produced the anopheles and other mosquitoes in force. We were well dosed with quinine by our resident doctor but there was a spell when six of our crew of fourteen were in hospital with fever and the rest of us just had to carry on the twenty-four-hour service; in 1916-17 German submarines were numerous off the Azores and at the entrance to the Straits of Gibraltar, both of which were within our sector.

There were times when food ran short and we got down to a diet of rice, sweet potatoes, "garden eggs", aubergines, a kind of sour green tomato, and meat which had been killed in Bathurst overnight, brought up by runner before sunrise and hurriedly cooked before it went bad.



*These uproarious African children from a nearby village were really very shy*

There was also "salt horse" which the lads said must have been pickled in Nelson's time.

We had plenty of flour. The metal linings of the containers were often leaky (which meant an abundance of weevils), but it did not in the least concern our native baker and they all went into the dough. This same native had his own particular flair for dress. He would wear a trilby hat, white robe, Moslem trousers and, believe it or not, spats, but no shoes. In the extra heat of the bakehouse he would just wear spats and a loin cloth.

Our water supply was unfit for drinking and rain water was stored in a large underground concrete tank. It had to be boiled and filtered before use, which made it very dead but with the help of a sparklet syphon and the addition of some pale straw-coloured fluid (at sundown) it was not too bad.

The local natives, mostly Mandingoes, were a good type. They were entirely bush bred and bush minded, and the bush provided practically all their simple requirements.

For some of them it was a novelty to see water coming through a pipe to an outside drain and I have seen a group of them sitting on their haunches for hours silently watching this "phenomenon". They could keep on pumping an obviously burst tyre until exhausted and then laughingly tell you that "tyre no agree for breeze".

A few more of the enlightened had heard of England and King George. Amongst them were some district chiefs who would pay us an occasional official visit. They came resplendent with much gold ornament, fine robing and ceremonial swords encased in elaborate multi-coloured leather work, and were attended by a retinue of lesser degree, tapering off to naked piccaninnies and pariah dogs.

One Ali Mussa of Sukomba was a very big noise, so we took him inside and showed him the "works". We "made sunshine" by switching on the ceiling lights, made "wind blow" by starting up the motor blower, "made fire" by slowly withdrawing a carbon break switch on an alternator field. His only comment was "Englishmen past devil", in other words even cleverer than that gentleman, and in consequence we were greatly respected by this primitive, superstitious people.

Ali asked what it was all for. We answered "for speak with King George". Ali said "I savvy George, George all right. I pray for George", adding "Tell George I come look you and say to him *Cairabi* (how do)". So we ran up a disc which, with the door of the silence cabinet open, made a lot of noise, waggled away at a key with the main switch out, and then listened intently with the earphones. We told him "King George said *Cairabi* and that he would pray for Ali Mussa".



*Typical bush vegetation in Gambia, in the low-lying river basin*

He left, quite satisfied and full of wonder, and was very pleased with a present of an electric lamp bulb which he hung up in his palm leaf hut, though he sent a runner over the following day to point out it didn't light.

These people had an easy life. They scratched the ground and sowed crops in the spring to the stimulating accompaniment of tomtoms, sat down until harvest time and then reaped and carried chanting as they ran with enormous head loads.

The only other signs of activity were people running for shelter on hearing the roar of an approaching tornado or the wild excitement when they spotted a black mamba, a ferocious snake, whose bite can be fatal in a few minutes. They would hunt one until they killed it, although often it escaped by going to earth.

Bathurst was then a little-known small seaport, the European population consisting of a handful of Government officials plus a few French traders.

There was no hotel or club. We only went to town for the occasional collection of stores and mail, the arrival of which every six weeks or so gave us our only contact with the world outside and was the one high spot in our existence. The sack would be emptied on the verandah where the lads fell on it like a pack of hounds.

Years later I met a traveller whose ship had called at Bathurst about the time of which I write; he had been ashore for two hours and found it was quite enough. I sympathised. We were there for nearly two years.

Quick got away first, on an oil tanker going to the Cape; he took over a similar station at Durban. I eventually got away on a ship going to Sierra Leone, hoping to get one from there without delay for Capetown, thence on to Hong Kong where I had to take over two stations. It took me quite a time to get there, but that, as Kipling would say, is another story.