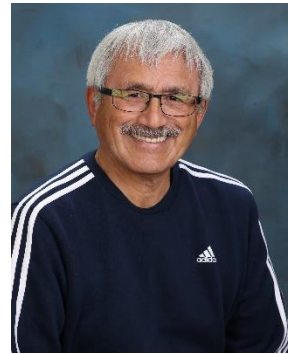


NINOXSOLA

Elders in Residence Program
Indigenous Education Comox Valley
Schools

Bryce Mercredi
'Christmas in the Tropics'



I spent my school years in Yellowknife in the North West Territories. Winters were long and cold. Normally the cold would set in at the end of September and the inland lakes would be frozen over by mid October and the days would be getting shorter.

By December, the temperatures would be in the minus 35-45 degrees and we would have five hours of daylight. If it were cloudy, the temperature would warm up to about minus 20 degrees which was quite balmy after a stretch of minus forty, (the inside of a freezer is minus 18).

This was my experience for the first twenty-two years of my life.

When I finished mining college in Ontario, I was working for a mining exploration company in Vancouver (Cordilleran Engineering) prospecting for base metals. Our camp was based in Northern BC on Tuchodi Lake. There were three parties of two prospectors who were sent out in fly camps to various areas in Northern BC. Our camps were situated above the treeline at about 1000 meters elevation. We would spend a week doing traverses, checking the scree slopes for signs of mineralization, and collecting stream sediment samples to be assayed in camp. We found some good showings and staked a promising prospect.

Eventually our summer came to a close and we shut down the camp and went back to Vancouver to finish up the project, register the claims we staked and complete all the paperwork from the summer. At this time, the Company I worked for had the contract to do all the exploration work in Western Canada for U.S. Steel which was based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They contacted Cordilleran Engineering and requested two geologists for their project in Indonesia. I was available and said that I wanted to go. I had to get a passport, a physical exam and shots before I went.

First of all I went to U.S. Steel main office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for orientation and what the job entailed. I spent two weeks there waiting for my visa and had to undergo another physical and more shots. My journey began on October 15, 1970, flying from Pittsburgh to San Francisco with another geologist from US Steel, Ihor Havreluk. We changed aircraft and continued on to Tokyo on Japan Air Lines. We spent the night in Tokyo then flew from Tokyo to Bangkok then on to Djakarta, Indonesia.

It was quite a sight flying into Djakarta. From the air it looked like a hodgepodge of buildings, huts and a jumble of streets. It looked like an oversized village of approximately four million people. The most noticeable thing that we noticed was the high heat and humidity.

We spent about a week in Djakarta while arrangements were made to fly to Sorong. We flew to Makassar in a DC 3 aircraft, where we spent the night, then on to Sorong. Total miles travelled was about 3000 km. We spent a few days in Sorong meeting the staff in the office then we got aboard the company boat for the trip to Kabarei Bay on Waigeo Island, which was a 5-hour trip. It was an interesting journey. The day was bright and sunny. For a time, there was flying fish that jumped out of the water and glided from about 15 to 25 meters before folding their wings and diving back in the water.

I spent the next few weeks familiarizing myself with the ar4a and what I was to do.

The job consisted of supervising an auger drilling/sampling and geological mapping of the nickel laterite deposits on various islands.

Normally back home prior to the Christmas season, you would see houses being decorated, and trees set up in houses. Also, must not forget the Christmas carols that would start in mid November. There was none of that where I was stationed. The nearest radio station that we heard on good days was from Mindanao in the Philippines. We were completely isolated.

Before Christmas, I was carrying out a prospecting program on the Island of Batanta looking for base metals, lead, zinc and copper. We had the company boat, Kapal Kabarei, crew and an Indonesian geologist who could speak English, that was very important for me as the crew and people we were working with only spoke Indonesian.

We were based in a little village which had a pier that could accommodate our boat. The chief gave us the use of their guesthouse which was at the end of the pier. The water was very shallow and sandy and extended about 100 meters into deep water.

All the houses in the village were built on stilts and just a few meters in from the water.

We hired four of the villagers to join us when we went on a traverse. They would cut a trail through the jungle and carry samples, our lunches and water. Trekking through the jungle was quite different than what we had done back home. Humidity was very high, ground very wet and slippery, and what amazed me was that the local people were in bare feet. The soles of their feet were very thick and rough, splintery or rocky ground didn't bother them.

I spent Christmas at their village On Christmas Eve the villagers spent the early evening at church. The village people were Christians and had a church. The service lasted until midnight. When the service was over they brought out their drums and flutes made from bamboo. They sang and danced (gully gully) all night. There was no exchanging of gifts nor was there any turkey to be had.

There was another little village across the bay that we were invited to on Christmas Day. Just after dark a prao, (a boat similar to a canoe), from that village paddled over to pick us up. There were 4 paddlers. I think it was a very quick trip as they didn't want to miss any of the festivities. Again, they sang and danced all night. Just before sunrise they took us home. The journey seemed to take twice as long as the night before.

The morning was clear with no breeze, as I was enjoying the stillness of the morning and the sun rise I felt rain. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and yet it rained. We got to our camp a little wet. I still could not reason why this happened.

I spent a few more days there then left as our project was finished. It was an interesting experience to spend Christmas in another country with different customs. An experience that I quite fondly recall.



Flying to Sorong on a DC 3