

Dateline: Cairns August 2019

Two Scarlets and a Blue walk into a bar in Cairns to sample the hospitality of the region; its warmth and its lush scenery. Alternatively, it could be said that a Professor, a Soldier and an Author walked into a bar, except that the timing was a tad off.

Neville Marsh, with his wife, Alison, visited Cairns on their way to Darwin, and caught up with local residents Chris and Rebecca Shaw. The change in Cairns after a number of years since their last visit was duly noted during a long discussion over a lazy lunch at the Yorkey's Knob Yacht Club. ('Yorkey' was an ex-Yorkshire immigrant fisherman of colourful character [drunk], who lived on the headland known as the Knob, in case you were wondering). We all had a great time with stories of past exploits, which both wives probably knew by rote, but you get that.



The following week Chris and Rebecca caught up with John and Hilary Ling. They were on a round-the-world trip taken, in part, to celebrate John's 80th birthday; a slightly extended Fogg adventure. Had they been a week earlier we could have had a proper SOF Dinner in the Tropics with three OFs!

John and Chris had been good friends at Brandeston, but on ascending to the College, the Fram 'sorting hat' put John into Stradbroke and Chris into Kerrison, making contact rare.

'Of all the tropical places, in all the Commonwealth countries, in all the world, he walked into mine,' with 140 years of stories to catch up on in 3.5 days. I have to say that we did our best, and we did cover a lot of ground.

On the evening they arrived, having driven the 2000+ km from Brisbane via Harvey Bay, the Whitsundays, Townsville, the Atherton Tablelands and the Daintree, we dined on the Cairns waterfront at Dundee's, and started the process of downloading the highlights of those intervening years, and basically deciding that we were both very lucky to be alive what with a shipwreck, ladder-fall, heart attack, sharks and toxic jellyfish, hostile natives and over-active horses; and that's only Chris's highlights.

The following day was a tour of Cairns City and views, lunch again at the same yacht club, and an evening seafood feast, that only Queensland can really justify. Wash that down with innumerable stories of derring-do and the inevitable learning-curve failures, and, in essence you have three OFs who have contributed their knowledge, discipline and integrity to those societies in which they found themselves.

The following day John and Hilary spent on the reef, forewarned of the dangers of Noel Coward's 'Sultry-ultra-violet rays' on to East Anglian Anglo-Saxon, white marble skin. Their day was perfect with clear, warm seawater and a plethora of colourful fish and corals. They walked on Michaelmas Cay where a number of species of terns nested in the sand and sparse grass.

In the evening, they still had enough energy to treat Chris and Rebecca to a great meal at a restaurant appropriately called, Linga Longa. They didn't – linger longer - that is! They caught an afternoon flight into the arms of the Sydney OFs lead by Colin Lipman and David Summers to continue the hedony that we try to provide for visiting SOF members in Australia.

Their cherished wives, I have to say, show great stoicism in the face of our introverted story repetition. They have their own stories, in their own language, and seem quite happy discussing their own priorities, while we look back with our grey hair and wonder how we ended up in a totally different place to that which we had imagined in our youth. But, what journeys!

