

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

BY HELEN READ

I grew up with the Red Arrows RAF display team dancing overhead in Farnborough, England. The thought of flying myself would make my heart and pulse burst, let alone the fact that you needed brains and a heroic personality!

I studied art then qualified as a nursing sister so that I could survive and earn a ticket to Australia where my mother had lived, and half my family still live.

But after qualifying I joined my cousin Alan Williamson in Nigeria, where he was working as a doctor in tropical medicine for the World Health Organisation. The Hamitan winds and floods convinced me that the only way to get to the outlying regions to maintain health care and the malaria research was to fly.

I desperately wanted to realise my dream of nursing and flying so for £100 I emigrated to Australia and began flying lessons, which were half the price they were in Nigeria.

After training as a midwife in Melbourne I sustained a severe whiplash injury in a car accident and this sent me "bush" (in more ways than one!).

Suddenly there was the time and opportunity to study – which was lucky, since the pain meant I had acquired the concentration span of a gnat. If it wasn't for my flying instructor Daryl Higgins' patience, in and out of the cockpit, I'd never have got airborne. Daryl's never-to-be forgotten words "you can teach a monkey to fly" boosted my morale (no offence to monkeys).

In 1983 I met Harold Dicks, Robin Miller Dicks' husband, in Perth.

Robin, among many other achievements, was a triple-certificated nursing sister who flew her Moonie aircraft throughout the Kimberley administering Sabin polio-myelitis vaccinations. She died tragically in 1975 of cancer and subsequently the Robin Miller Dicks Memorial Foundation, aligned to the RFDS, set up a scholarship fund to help other nurses to fly.

I was extremely fortunate in winning the first scholarship, enabling me to gain my commercial pilots' licence in 1984.

That year I began working for the Pintupi Homelands Health Service in the Gibson Desert, taking the C180 with me.

The fuel was trucked in 44-gallon drums and the tie-downs had to be pretty secure for the rapid willy willies. I frequently flew between Wallungurru (Kintore) in the Northern Territory and Kiwirrkurra in Western Australia, as the "Bush Mob" had just come in and were ill with first-contact diseases.

Harold suggested I apply again for the scholarship, saying that one day I "might need an instrument rating". I did, and thanks once more to Robin and Harold I got one.

The enormity of peoples' lives and conditions at Kintore had a huge impact on me. The art was explained a little, but the depth of cultural knowledge and the seri-



Art, aviation and remote-area nursing from Nigeria to Australia's Gibson Desert... and how the strands came together

ousness of what people were describing in their paintings was obvious.

The tragedies and heart-wrenching events of everyday life at and around Kintore were exhausting. Premature births and infant deaths, due in part to malnutrition, plus chronic chest, eye and intestinal infections were all too apparent.

Our clinic had one daytime communal two-way radio and sported a dentist's bench in a small windowless cubicle. Our health team was reduced for a few months after the only Western-trained doctor left after contracting hepatitis and the only other sister's employment period ceased.

In 1986 I had the idea of Didgeri Air Tours to fly people around Australia as I felt that so many Australians hadn't seen their own country. In the back of my mind I was being bugged. Nothing I had seen in Africa was as miserable and apparently unknown as the conditions I had witnessed in our own country. (I had become an Australian citizen by then).

"Didgeri" didn't do. I set off to Sydney to pass Senior Commercial exams which didn't work, so tried Melbourne which didn't either – for a while. Then the pilots' strike and world recession took their toll, so I went back to drawing and painting; and of all things I met artists who wanted to visit inland Australia!

The first few trips were combined with

ferry flights from Melbourne to Broome so that the cost could be kept down. Word of mouth about the art tours spread as I introduced white artists to Aboriginal artists.

I moved to Broome in Western Australia and worked as a freelance pilot and as a sister at the local hospital until Didgeri Air Art Tours spread her wings.



A Thousand Journeys

Two years ago I was asked to allow a selection of the Aboriginal artworks I have collected to tour NSW and Victorian Regional Galleries. After consultation with the artists, the exhibition *A Thousand Journeys* will begin a two-year tour this year at Tin Sheds Gallery at the University of Sydney.

Pauline Guthrie from Tin Sheds Gallery is curator for the show which involves 47 artists from 12 communities. The artworks are grouped to highlight the regional diversities across Arnhem Land, Kimberley, the North Tanami Desert communities and Melville Island.

Tour dates and venues are as follows: *During 1998, University of Sydney* (March 27-April 18); *Tamworth Gallery* (July 3-August 9); *Newcastle University Gallery* (November 4-December 13);

During 1999, Albury Regional Art Centre (April 9-May 9); *Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery* (June 6-July 18); *Ballarat Fine Art Gallery* (July 30-September); *Mildura Arts Centre* (October 15-November 14).

‘The enormity of people’s lives...’

of Australia, arranging, where possible, the necessary entry permits.

I mostly fly in VH-FLU, a C185, but sometimes take a C180, the Aztec or Navajo according to requirements.

My clients are often in a position to influence others' lives. They are people in politics, health and health administration, education and the media; and National Gallery curators and advisers. Others interested in Aboriginal art and culture come from all over the world.

I hope that helping to bring people together through art and travel will increase the understanding of Aboriginal culture and improve all our lives.

