

### **Our Life's Journey with Orchids**

By Chris Heysen

The air hung heavy in the early morn – the smoke from overnight fires lying horizontally like a faint silvery river suspended a few hundred feet above the wide valley floor. There was a stirring of the quiet in the village below, an occasional dog barked gently, a creaking of timber as someone moved in one of the huts fashioned from rough hewn logs and woven bamboo that served as homes to 200-odd people. As the first rays of the sun touched the mountain tops and the light began to filter into the valley the leader of the village chooks announced the arrival of the new day in his usual harsh and loudly crowing voice.

The village quickly came awake and there soon developed a growing sense of excitement. As I rubbed the sleepy dust from my eyes I asked what was happening and was told that this was the day that “Missus belong Plaua” (The Orchid Lady) would be arriving - as soon as the clouds lifted and allowed the small Cessna to fly in from Lae and land at the small bush airstrip across the creek from the village. Everyone was to be “on their toes” and dressed in their finest to greet her. It was obvious from the hubbub that she was greatly respected, even loved – but also, perhaps, a little feared.

The place: Vagau – a village at approx 5000 feet (around 1500m) above sea level in the headwaters of the Snake River in the Morobe District of Papua New Guinea.

The year: 1964. I was a 21 year old Agricultural Officer based at Mumeng, about 14 - 15 hours walk away – there was no road, just walking tracks in the jungle. I was on patrol – walking from village to village and staying in each place for a few days while advising the people, who were basically subsistence farmers, how to grow coffee – a new cash crop for the area.

I'd never met this Missus belong Plaua but thought I'd better hang around until she arrived in case there was anything I, as the only English speaking person within 100kms or so, could do to help.

A couple of hours later the faint buzz of an engine could be heard, growing louder as the little plane circled the valley to lose height before landing. The whole village was lined up at the side of the airstrip as a group of three or four women, all dressed in well worn, practical, bush type clothes, and strong walking boots alighted from the Cessna. In their midst was a large lady who immediately started giving orders in a loud stentorian voice, and in perfect Pidgin, to all and sundry. She obviously needed no help at all.

She spied me among the waiting throng – I wasn't hard to see being the only white face in the sea of brown. “And who are you?” she demanded. I tentatively introduced myself. “Ah ha – Didiman! [Pidgin English for Agricultural Officer] - you can help organise some of the bois [village men] to find orchids for us!”

Thus was my first meeting with Andrée Millar! She and a few friends were there to collect orchids for the Lae Botanic Gardens – especially Dendrobiums (both soft and hard cane) and Bulbophyllums. The mountains around Vagau went up to nearly 7,000 feet, (over 2,000m), in parts heavily forested

but in parts also open grassland, and were ideal sites for many relatively rare orchids both terrestrial and epiphytic – not to mention numerous species of Rhododendrons growing in the open grassed areas and on the edges of the jungle. Trained in agriculture, I had only a very rudimentary knowledge of botany but was fascinated by the plants that the villagers collected for these women. Many were in flower – the typical antelope-type Dendrobies and huge Bulbophyllums (most with rather non-descript flowers, at least to my way of thinking). Also a number of lovely *Spathoglottis* spp. terrestrial orchids.

Next day I had to move on to the next village to continue my real work – but my interest had been sparked and a month or so later I followed up on Andrée's invitation to visit her at the Lae Botanic Gardens. Here she had a wonderful collection of exotic plants – and especially orchids – not only from New Guinea but from all over South East Asia. It was my first exposure to Vandas, Arachnis, Ascocentrums, Renantheras, etc. Their beautiful and exotic looking flowers captured me - I was smitten!!



Lae Botanic Gardens (1964) – *Arachnis* spp.

Later that year I returned to Australia on leave – to marry my long time sweetheart and bring my beautiful young blonde bride back to New Guinea. We'd known each other since early high school but in the lead up to the wedding I discovered something that I'd never known before – Lyn's favourite flower was the orchid! Her wedding bouquet was a beautifully made arrangement of Cymbidiums.

On return to PNG Andrée took us both under her large and protective wing. Her own children were in Australia studying at University so in a way we were almost surrogates for them. Who were we to complain? In our spare time we collected orchids from the Mumeng/Bulolo area for her (this was long before CITES was even thought of) and she provided us with cuttings etc. from her more exotic (to us) plants from across Asia.

In a little over a year we had a large collection of our own – mostly PNG natives but also many exotics. On one particular day a young lad brought us something we'd never seen before – a beautiful white orchid with about 10 flowers on a single spray. The leaves were large, elongated and flat – and there was no long cane or pseudobulb as there was with all the other orchids we'd found in the area. For Lyn it was love at first sight! Andrée subsequently told us that this was *Phalaenopsis amabilis*. Although we've had many, many other orchids in the intervening years it is this beautiful orchid that has really driven our dreams for what we'd like to grow.



1966 – *Phalaenopsis amabilis* collected at Mumeng in PNG

Unfortunately, as was common in the public service in PNG, we were soon to be transferred – this time to a lowland area not far from Rabaul in East New Britain. A limited shipping allowance was insufficient to take all our collection - so we bequeathed many of our orchids to the Botanic Gardens in Lae.

The selected remnants of our collection – still around a couple of hundred plants - were packed into wooden crates - doing what we could to give them some aeration. It was North West Monsoon season with high temperatures and high humidity. Our orchids, most of which were acclimatised over many generations to life at 1000 meters or more, barely survived the sea journey. Many died of rot. It was quite devastating to see them when we opened the crates several weeks later.

However some did survive and we built a new, very open (to maintain maximum air movement), shade house at our new home. The local area did not seem to have a great variety of native orchids – certainly those we did see were of little interest after the wonderful Denrobies and our special Phally from the highlands of Morobe District, and of course we no longer had Andrée to guide us.

We struggled on for a year or two but when we were transferred yet again we decided not to try to take our remaining orchids with us.

But life is full of interesting twists and turns and in 1972 we were posted to Port Moresby. By happy coincidence only 6 months before this Andrée Millar had been appointed curator of the brand new National Botanic Gardens located in the grounds of the University of PNG at Waigani – an outer suburb of Port Moresby (and only 2-3 kilometres from where we now lived). There she was establishing what was to become an outstanding orchid collection – both PNG natives and other exotics from Asia and the rest of the world – along with what, in years to come, would be a national treasure of tropical trees and shrubs and other plants from all over the country. At the time of PNG's Independence, in 1975, she was awarded an OBE for her work in obtaining worldwide recognition for the flora, and especially the orchids, of PNG.



Orchid display at the first ever PNG Nation Orchid Show – circa 1973-74

It was wonderful to renew our friendship – and of course she repaid our collecting of orchids for her years before by helping us to develop a new collection of our own. The climate in Port Moresby is similar to much of northern Australia with a distinct and quite extended dry season and a 4-5 month wet season – annual rainfall is a little over 1000mm (less than 40 inches), about the lowest of anywhere in PNG. Like Darwin, the rainfall is during the hottest months, with the cooler winter months being quite dry. We were able to grow many of the Asian Vandaceous-type orchids with little or no shade. They were mostly grown in raised beds of roughly chopped coconut husks with wire trellises to support the plants. A six foot long bed full of a hundred or so plants of *Vanda* Miss Joaquim in full flower is a sight to warm the cockles of your heart.

Eventually it became time to return to Australia – PNG had been an independent country for two years and increasingly wanted to replace expats with local people so there were no real long term career prospects in the country. We knew that we couldn't take our orchids back to Adelaide as we didn't even have a house for ourselves let alone a heated and humidified glasshouse that would be required to grow the orchids we were so proud of in Moresby. We gave a whole lot of them to a friend who was going to live in Far North Queensland - on the understanding that we would one day claim some cuttings back from her. Sadly, we lost contact, and by the time we were able to think about building an appropriate place for tropical orchids (more than a dozen years later) we had no idea how to find her.

On leaving PNG in May of 1977 we spent three weeks or so tripping through South East Asia and were astounded by the orchid gardens in Thailand, Malaysia and especially Singapore. Acres upon acres of wonderful exotic plants flowering away like there was no tomorrow. We have returned many times since and these places never fail to thrill. The Mandai Gardens (Singapore) and the Orchid collection in the Botanic Gardens of Singapore are especially wonderful places to visit.

Within weeks of our return home to Adelaide we had already purchased a small shade house and we started visiting Syd Monkhouse's Adelaide Orchids at Happy Valley, Valley Orchids (near Reynella) and Johnson Orchids, then at Highbury. We quickly built a collection – this time based on Cymbidiums with the occasional cold growing Cattleya. We moved into our new home at Banksia Park at the end of that year and had a whole new garden to establish – so the orchids took somewhat of a back-seat for a while.

Workwise I had taken a 180 degree turn – from tropical agriculture (tea, coffee, cocoa and coconuts etc.) to Mediterranean-climate, dry land agriculture – broad acre cropping and livestock systems became my specialty. I spent 6 months or so each year away from home and travelling to the extremely dry countries of the world (North Africa and the Middle East) with nary an orchid to be found anywhere. But Lyn kept her love for orchids and our small collection of Cymbs grew over these years to probably a couple of hundred plants which gave us much pleasure.

And then another upheaval! In 1985 I had the chance to take up a position as Project Leader of an agricultural development in Jordan. But we'd have to rent out our home. What to do with the orchids? No tenant could be expected to look after them. Luckily we had great neighbours who had become close friends and they agreed to look after our orchids. So on one very busy weekend we dismantled the shade house, re-erected it next door and moved all the orchids to their new home. Four years later, on our return to Australia, we retrieved them again – all in very good order with names intact and looking healthy. We offered half to our friends in return for their efforts but they declined and never grew orchids of their own – strange, but we were very grateful – they had really done a great job.

By this time Johnson Orchids had moved to Houghton – in the hills not far from where we then lived. We were frequent visitors – firstly for Cymbs but we became increasingly interested in Dean's more exotic orchids. One day he showed us his large hot house – it took our breaths away – with hundreds upon hundreds of beautiful Phally's – seemingly endless flowers. This was at the time when Johnson Orchids were probably the premium grower of Phallys in SA if not in Australia. They had achieved many awards for plants of their own breeding. Remember – Phally's were Lyn's first love in orchids. To see the look on her face when we walked into that hothouse was something really special. So what could a guy do?

We were now in a position, both financially and time wise, to look at building a hot house so I set about drawing up plans and buying the required "stuff". It was a simple lean-to type of house built in a 3 metre space between one wall of the house and a high retaining wall on the far side – about 4 metres long, timber frame, with sheets of flat, slightly opaque, fibre glass attached to the outside of the frames. On the inside we stapled clear poly film to provide a double wall. An old evaporative cooler was inserted in one end wall – I rigged this with a float valve to the water supply so that we didn't have to continually refill the water reservoir. Heating was via a MaxiGrow blower/heater (this was in the days before expensive electricity!). Misters, supplied by pump from our rain water tank, provided further cooling when needed.

Nearly twenty five years after seeing that first Phally – the *Phal. amabilis* from the jungle near Mumeng - we once again had a place where we could grow our own. Our collection of tropical orchids grew, and on Dean Johnson's advice, we joined our first orchid club – The Orchid Club of South Australia (OCSA) – in 1992. It was wonderful to be part of a group of like minded people although, in those days, the club was huge and novices like us felt a bit lost in the throng.

But we did well and won a couple of Monthly flower competitions in Second Division – once with a lovely Cattleya we'd brought down from a holiday in Darwin – a beautiful jade green with magnificent perfume (I don't remember the name) and once with a New Guinea-type Dendrobium. The latter win, coincidentally perhaps, happened to be on the night that Andrée Millar was visiting the club from her home in Queensland. We renewed once again our friendship with her after 15 years. She was now an old lady but as feisty as always and as ever ready to share her encyclopaedic knowledge of orchids.



Orchids in our Hothouse – circa 1993

Sadly she passed away only two or three years later in 1995 but we were so grateful that we'd once again connected with our old friend – and that she had “blessed” our humble attempts to follow her original inspiration to us all those years before. It is many years ago now but I have tears in my eyes as I remember those times.

During this time Lyn had developed a long time interest in flower arranging. I well remember her wonderful skills with orchids in particular. She did several weddings – one with orchids specially flown in from Darwin and another totally with Sturt Desert Peas that were spectacularly beautiful.

Then came another major turn in our lives: having recently retired from the company I worked for, and set up as a freelance consultant, Austrade (The Australian Trade Commission) offered me the position of Senior Trade Commissioner, based in Cairo but responsible for Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and, later, Libya. Yes, I know that all those countries sound scary today but this was late 1998, a time of relative peace in the Middle East. So, once again we packed up our stuff and headed off for foreign shores. This time our son, his wife Gail, and new baby son, Dylan, (our first grandchild), were to live in our house - so we had no qualms about the orchids being properly cared for.

Our four years in Cairo were totally devoid of orchids – there didn't seem to be any orchid culture in the country. The only orchids we ever saw were cut flowers from either Singapore or Amsterdam. No Phallys – only Vanda types and Singapore Dendrobiums. Of course we holidayed occasionally in Thailand and always returned to Egypt with a box of orchid flowers – but as you all know this is a fleeting tease for the real thing – a growing, flowering plant that lasts for weeks (or months if they're Phallys) in your home.

At the end of this time, late 2002, we had the opportunity to take up a post in Dubai, which, as a tax free country, was simply too good to pass up. Our son and his family wanted to move back to their home so we decided to sell the house we'd owned for 25 years. Another friend stepped in and offered to look after the Cymys but there was no-one able to look after the hot house orchids. We advertised them (several thousands of dollars worth) and the only offer was for a few hundred from a man who was going to take them to Bali! Lyn nearly cried as he loaded them into his trailer – one piled on top of the other like so many bits of flotsam in the sea, with no care about their welfare.

Although Dubai was totally different to Cairo in nearly every way – a clean and totally modern city where everything worked – we were never the less very pleasantly surprised when the local garden

centre was selling live Phally plants – no names and not especially good varieties but Phallys all the same- no doubt imported from Asia or Holland. What can you do when confronted by a Phally that just sits up and says “Take me home.”

We had no hot house (never needed in Dubai) and knew that a shade house would be way too hot for them with day time temperatures during summer in the high forties every day. Humidity was also high but this would not have been enough to counteract the extreme heat. So our small but once again growing collection was housed inside our home - which was more or less permanently air-conditioned. Temperature was therefore no problem and we kept them on trays of pebbles with water in the trays to maintain humidity. At peak we probably had a couple of dozen plants like this and several of them re-flowered from year to year.



White Phally (un-named) re-flowering. Note glass ‘terrarium’ and stone mulch to raise humidity in the air-conditioned atmosphere inside our house.

2006 – It was time to end our journeying and come home. We’d brought a block of land whilst home on leave the year before but the building was some time from completion so we rented a flat for 15 months or so. By this time we knew that Cymys just didn’t do it for us – yes, we did retrieve some of our plants from the friend who’d been looking after them but they’d lost their name labels and whilst healthy neither of us were greatly inspired by them. So we let our friend keep the majority of the Cymys and slowly bought a few Phals – mostly unnamed varieties from Bunnings and flower shops. Lyn has become extremely good at growing Phals inside and some of those plants that we’ve now had for 5 or 6 years continue to flower faithfully each year. We’ve even won a number of Flower of Division monthly competitions with these unnamed orchids.

As I’m sure you all know building a new garden from scratch takes a lot of time and effort – especially when the land is steep and requires retaining walls, drainage, etc. It was not until two years ago (2011) that our new garden was at last at the stage where we could find both room and time for a small hot house.

Lyn was ecstatic when, for her birthday two years ago she received an envelope containing the order note for a brand new 2m x 3m bi-wall hot house. An immediate visit to Johnson Orchids was required to buy something to put into it when it was finally assembled. We built benches from push together parts and added under bench electric heating to one side (set to a minimum of 17 degrees).

A small fan keeps the air moving and an evaporative cooler helps to modify the heat in summer and raises humidity somewhat.



The new hothouse.

The first year with the new house was very much a learning curve – there was way too much light at the start. Our house is quite exposed and gets a lot of light from all sides – even Phallys, that like a reasonable amount of light, developed yellowish streaks in their leaves quite quickly. So we added extra shade cloth both over the top and at the ends of the house and this stays in place all year – the light intensity during winter is still adequate. We have now also learned how to control temperature better during heatwaves (an all too common occurrence in these days of global warming) through frequent misting and we've placed large 400 litre containers full of water under the benches which helps to modify temperature fluctuations.

We finally both retired from full time work last year – we're both close to 70 – and, now that we have the time have once again rejoined OCSA. We've also subscribed to Orchids Australia as well as the International Phalaenopsis Association. OCSA is now much smaller than in its hey days of the early 90's but much friendlier and we've made many new friends. We've learned that, although many are beautiful, our un-named orchids are a dead-end in terms of breeding and awards so we're now focussing on named cultivars and hope to do some of our own crossings in due course.



*Phal.* 'Miraflore' – which won Champion Phalaenopsis for us at the Autumn Show – 2013.

So life has come full circle – along with our growing collection of Phallys and Oncidiums, Cats and Dendrobies I finally have a couple of strap leaf Vandas and an Ascanda – two of the plants that I fell in love with when Andrée Millar introduced me to them in the Lae Botanical Gardens a little less than 50 years ago! All I need now is an *Arachnis* and a *Renanthera* and, and, and..... Orchid growers are never content are they?

**Postscript:** At the Royal Adelaide Show last September I was sitting talking to Russell Job, OCSA President and general orchid guru. He asked what it was that had first sparked my interest in orchids – and I related the story above about Andrée Millar and her influence. But right in front of us was a beautiful “Donkey orchid” – the wonderful Australian native terrestrial, *Diuris* spp. I then remembered that as a young lad, living in Hahndorf in the Adelaide Hills, I had collected native orchids in late spring each year and sold bunches of them on the roadside – the main road to Melbourne in those days. I vividly remember what we then called Spider orchids (*Arachnorchis* spp.), Donkey orchids (*Diuris* spp.), Monkshoods (*Pterostylis* spp.), Blue bonnets (*Thelymitra* spp.) and others from over 60 years ago. Russell sagely observed that that was the true start of my love affair with the orchid – and I cannot but agree!