HEATHER GRAHAM - A tribute

Early in 1964, pioneer nurse Sister Heather Graham, a triple certificated nurse from Adelaide, was appointed as a Survey Sister with Department of Health in Darwin. Heather already had a family connection with a remote Northern Territory community:

Heather’s Aunty Jessie at the age of 40 years was at Croker Island caring for the half caste children during the war years 1941 when the Japanese invasion was imminent. She and another woman took the children from Croker Island and trekked south via Oenpelli where they slept overnight before walking on to Pine Creek, then travelled by train to Larrimah. They were then transported by the Australian Army to Alice Springs, from where they took the Ghan train to Adelaide and made their way to Otford near Sydney. The night they arrived in Sydney was the night the Japanese bombed the Sydney Harbour. Their story is described in a book by Margaret Somerville They Crossed a Continent (1991).

Over the next two years, Heather visited many of the outlying bush settlements, supporting the work of the bush nurses and assisting to identify and follow up those with health concerns. Visits included Bamyili, Elcho Island, Yirrkala, Numbulwar, Groote Eylandt as well as road trips alone in a heavy four-wheel drive vehicle to outlying cattle stations and small communities. From Elcho Island, Heather was flown by legendary missionary Harold Shepherdson to assess health needs in the remote Aboriginal communities at Mirrngaytja and Koolatong River, heralding greater involvement by bush nurses in these isolated communities of the Top End.

Heather describes her experience:

1964 I spent visiting communities up and down “the track” and beyond. We had had a lesson on how to use the radio and how to put up the aerial. One senior Welfare officer gave us a lecture on the marriage system. Ellen sent me off. I did three road trips. Ngaire Stichbury showed me the roads on the first trip. Once off the bitumen, when we got out a bit into the bush, we found the track was overgrown. I had to get out and walk ahead of the vehicle to try to find where the road went. The roads were not well marked - some were not marked at all. We couldn't find the road to Goodparla, so we didn't go there...

One night, when Ngaire and I were staying at the pub at Pine Creek, we fused the lights. It was really hot and we had found a fan in one of the rooms. There was a lot of noise from the bar when the lights went out. We just went quietly back to bed...

I thought I was going to the Territory to work in a team, but I had to do the road trips alone after the first one. I couldn’t tell my parents. When I wrote to my parents, I said “we” did this and “we” did that - that is, me and my land rover...

A couple of times I got asked what I was doing driving alone. Men in the outback did not like us being alone on the roads in our vehicles.

I got three punctures ...but I had a guardian angel with me. The first was at Mataranka, which was owned by Dr Schneider who was an eye specialist in Adelaide - he used to collect vegetation and plants for identification. The station manager didn’t like me, but his wife was a sweetie. The manager said to me, “Is that your vehicle out there?” It had a flat tyre. He changed it for me, but did it with a bad grace.
The second was sixteen miles from Katherine - I was visiting farms along the river and heard a clicking noise. The metal packing strip from the big mail-bag had come adrift and the nail was penetrating the tyre. But the tyre stayed inflated and I managed to get back to Katherine.

The third puncture was coming back to Darwin on a Friday afternoon from Banka Banka roadhouse. I just got back to Darwin as the clerical staff were packing up and leaving the office at 4.21pm. I parked the vehicle at the Department of Health office. The tyre went down over the weekend - the staff saw it when they came to work on Monday and told us.

We went to Nutwood Downs, Daly Waters, Adelaide River where we stayed the night, Mount Bundey, Helen Springs, Muckety, Douglas River (this was one of the first places to have domesticated buffalo), Elsey, Hodgson Downs, Nutwood Downs, Mummalary, Tipperary. We ended at Banka Banka, where we stayed at the pub. Peggy Maher was then matron at Tennant Creek Hospital.

Later I went to El Sherana and Moline with Dr Helen Phillipps. Manbulloo station was one of Lord Vestey's stations. A white stockman told me "that old Aboriginal fellow is marvellous, he will go off with a donkey and check out the bores..."

Tipperary was through the scrub, along winding tracks. A nice couple were working there. The next time I visited Tipperary was with Brenda Divine and Hazel Sinclair. By then, there were different people there and they were starting to grow sorghum. It was an appalling scene, the bush had been flattened. The sorghum didn't work anyway...

At Daly Waters, a fellow was trying to change a tyre, but he had no spare.

In 1965, I went everywhere by air - Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala, Elcho, Numbulwar, Bamyili, Maningrida. At Maningrida there was an older nurse who used to smoke heavily. However we went, we did health checks for the local population and checked their vaccinations.
At Yirrkala I was doing hearing tests at the school. I was supposed to be going to Groote Eylandt, but ended up going to Yirrkala. The Grahams were there, also Wally and Jill Fawell. Wally was superintendent. Sister Leila Jones was relieving at Yirrkala. I was not sleeping well, and was taking sleeping tablets.

While I was at Yirrkala, there was a murder. We had had a lovely day off, walking to the back beach with the teachers. We had had a picnic there.

Late that night, there was a fight between bush versus beach camp people - a terrific hullabaloo late in the night. Aborigines and staff men were coming to the hospital. Leila and I were locked in the medical room with the injured people. One man was killed. Daymbalipu was a school-teacher. Daymbalipu's brother Wirilma was badly injured. The victims' first and second wives were banging their heads, making a terrible row. I was dishing out sleeping pills to try to settle them down. The mission nurses radioed through to Darwin. Dr “Spike” Langsford was there in Darwin on the two-way radio. The plane came out next day. They took one body and the injured were flown out to Darwin Hospital. I returned to Darwin, because it was no time to be trying to do a health survey.

In 1965 there was a measles epidemic at Yirrkala - the poor kids, we got them all to come to the school. They were lying on the ground under the school. We gave them lots of fluids. The teachers helped us look after them.

Later I went out to do a health survey at Port Keats. A little boy who had recovered in Darwin Hospital from measles returned home. His parents were thrilled to have him back.

When I got to Numbulwar, the nurse there Joan Smedley said to me, "I want you to take off my finger nail". I nearly died. She had a paronychia and could not cure it. Being the only nurse, there was no-one to do it for her. She told me what to do, but I did not want to do it. She insisted. In the end, I did what she told me to do and removed the nail. She was tough. The worst part was, being a Mission, there was no grog to revive me afterwards!
Before 1967, the Aboriginal people were settled at cattle stations, missions and settlements. Then came the referendum, which gave them citizenship and electoral rights. Until then, Aboriginal men working on cattle stations were not paid for their labour; they just got rations and clothing. After 1967, the cattle stations had to pay them. Many Aborigines had to leave the cattle stations then and they were dispersed. It was not fair, because the cattle stations were their land.

One time I was driving in to Bamyili to help Sister Toni Eperjesy. I had a new Toyota land cruiser. Going in to Bamyili through black soil country, the vehicle spun right around to face the other way.

I made two visits to Bathurst Island to see the set-up for hearing aids. I stayed with the lay sisters. There was an owl sitting above the toilet. It was wet season. Because of the noise of the rain on the tin roof, I couldn’t do hearing checks. I asked the boys to dance for me. They were reticent at first.

The Bishop's house at Bathurst Island was where the priest was when he was telling Darwin about the Japs coming during the war. We had lunch on the beach. The Aboriginal girls went hunting, then made fires and cooked their food.

I found one undiagnosed leprosy patient at Elcho Island. Then I went with Mr Sheppy to one of the remote outstations, Mirrngaytja Sheppy used to bring in crocodile skins from these outstations, take supplies and conduct church services with wind-up record player. One time, Sheppy took a young man anthropology student from Canberra National University and me to the Koolatong River where there were three Aboriginal families living. I checked the children for health problems. The Aboriginal people living there told me they do not swim in the river because there are crocodiles. We left the young student there.

On two occasions at Yirrkala I recall a young Aboriginal girl coming in to the hospital swaying and comatose and with stertorous breathing. We were told that the trouble was “Aboriginal business”. There may have been ceremonies involving her the night before. The girl would lie
in the hospital inert for hours and we were unable to communicate with her. One time this happened when Dr Fred Clements was visiting Yirrkala. We sent one girl off on the plane to Darwin, but she recovered spontaneously there and there was no explanation.

Doctors who were working in Darwin Hospital during my time in the Northern Territory included Dr Lo, physician, Dr Moo, eye specialist, Dr Pat Cowdy, psychiatrist, Dr Alan Walker, paediatrician, Dr Bromwich, surgeon, Dr John Quinn, surgeon (he later married Sister May Buscall). Dr John Hargrave was medical superintendent at East Arm Leprosy Hospital.

Two Ear, Nose and Throat specialists visited Darwin Hospital from Adelaide twice a year. They were Dr Dean Beaumont and Dr Maurice Brown. These specialists were occasionally taken out bush, but mainly they worked from Darwin Hospital.

Dr Helen Phillipps did the follow-up work in Darwin for the Ear Nose and Throat clinic. This was in addition to her work as School Medical Officer and Immunisation Clinic for the greater Darwin area.

In late 1966, Sister Heather Graham joined Dr Phillipps' team and was therefore ably involved in all three areas, being the first School Nurse in the Top End and assisting in the organisation needed for distributing Sabin vaccine in remote settlements.

Heather Graham had a great, insatiable and deep love for the people, features and creatures of the Top End of the Northern Territory. In her free time, she loved nothing more than to drive out to the outlying areas in her Volkswagen “beetle” with her father's excellent camera, quietly enjoying and often capturing the magnificent scenery and ambience of the vast floodplains, rivers, waterfalls, billabongs, exquisite bird, animal and reptile life, forests, rainforests, jagged coastline and beautiful tropical gardens. Heather readily shared her love and enthusiasm for the bush especially with her colleagues, but also with her many friends. Her slide collection from the Top End is lodged in the Northern Territory Archives in Cavenagh Street, Darwin for all to share.

Heather returned to Adelaide at the end of 1969, to enable her to care for her aunt who had inherited a degenerative neuro-muscular condition and was in need of care. Sadly, Heather herself also succumbed to this disease not long before losing her aunt. She remained living independently for a number of years before finally and bravely accepting her own need for care in a nursing home. As the last remaining member of her family, Heather's philosophical acceptance that some of her family had lived to 102 years and she may be in for the long haul herself enabled her to graciously accept her circumstances, communicate with her many friends until she was taken to be with her beloved Lord, peacefully and in her sleep on 10 January 2013.

Heather Graham was a great encourager. As a friend, she was trustworthy and true. She had a great sense of humour and of fun. She was kind and courteous, generous, reliable, courageous and caring. She will be sadly missed.

Vale, our beloved Heather. Thank you for a wonderful friendship.
Inservice at East Arm Leprosy Settlement, August 1969

Women gathering waterlilies, Elcho Island, 1965

Heather at Numbulwar with Graeme and Kathy Ann, 1965

Stuart Highway from Hayes Creek Inn, looking south, 1964

Fogg Dam, Humpty Doo

Bungguljama, Elcho Island, 1965

Compiled by Jillian Moore from information shared by Heather Graham 6 January 2003