

2: Yuendumu's Last Stand

Peter Toyne, the School Principal, called a meeting. It was only a small meeting as most people had now given up.

‘I’ve been talking with Peggy,’ he told me the day before the meeting. ‘Her sons are sniffing and she wants to take them out to their outstation at Mt Theo. She said that if we support her, she will take other kids.’

I remembered Mt Theo and the old man Japangardi with the funny nose and his Series One Land Rover. I didn’t know about much about his wife Peggy; to me she was a large middle-aged



Old Japangardi, founder of Mt Theo Program (photo by Frances Mocnik)

Aboriginal woman who looked like she ate a lot. I didn't know she had a tradition of adopting stray kids into her family, that she broke the mould and would take care of anyone, whether they were family or not. She had earned the nickname 'Mother Brown', but I didn't know any of that yet.

Dogs settled next to their owners as we sat cross-legged in the sand, women on one side of the group, men on the other. Peter got up.

'We've beaten petrol sniffing in the past but this time it's different. We've tried to stop it through the families and by running strong recreation and education programs. We've tried to take the young blokes away to other communities. This time it hasn't worked. So Yuendumu is facing a future where its young people will be crazy, sick and poisoned.

'They won't be able to learn Yapa ways or have a Kardiya education. Many will be dead before they are thirty. It's not a problem someone else will fix for us. Government people will not come and sit down here and help, day after day.

'It's not going to be fixed either if Yapa look to whitefellas to fix it, or if whitefellas say it's just family business for the Yapa. We will only fix it if the community decides it is our problem and that we must all work together to fix it now,' he declared.

The meeting resolved to support two outstations, Mt Theo for the male sniffers and Mala Bore for the female sniffers, and to make the youth recreation program stronger.

The idea of the using the outstations was pretty simple. We needed to take the peer group pressure off sniffing. We decided to simply remove the 'ringleaders' or chronic sniffers from Yuendumu and send them out bush. With the chronic sniffers out of the way, we hoped that by running youth activities every night, after school and on the weekends, we would be able to divert the other young people and the 'recreational sniffers' from sniffing.

In the long term it was hoped that we could get the Education

Department to fund a teacher to run a school at the outstations. But right then we had to make do with what we had, which was willing elders. The plan was that the chronic sniffers would simply live at the outstations for a month at a time, giving their bodies and brains time away from petrol. They would live a Yapa kind of bush life, spending their days hunting and learning bushcraft from the elders. No magic processes or programs were proposed, but everyone believed that sacred country was powerful, and that being out bush was healing.

Everybody at the meeting knew the sniffers would be resistant to being sent out bush; there was no illusion that they would come voluntarily. But we had to stop sniffing, otherwise young people were going to die.

Robin Japanangka, the School Council Chairperson, offered \$5000 of school money to buy food for the program. Robin was a staunch leader in the face of sniffing. Single-handedly he had continued with the night patrols long after the other elders had given up.

The clinic promised to supply first-aid kits and each organisation said they would lend their vehicles to help with transporting people and supplies. My job was to organise the supplies and shop on behalf of anyone living at the outstations.

This small gathering of people adopted the name 'Petrol Sniffing Working Party' and we committed ourselves to work every day until the problem was solved.

Maiden voyage to Mt Theo

Just over a week after that meeting, Roy Jupurrula, the police aide, and some of the elders drove around the community with the police Toyota and the cage truck and ordered sniffers to get in. The cage truck is like one of those human cargo trucks shown on TV news carrying refugees around Africa. It is the same dimensions as

a rigid chassis furniture removal truck. But instead of having van walls of sheet metal, it has walls of steel mesh. It has a solid steel floor and two metal benches that run the length of the cargo space along the side walls. As we pulled up to each camp in Yuendumu, the rear mesh doors flung open, swags were thrown in followed by dogs, billycans, drums of flour, axes and boomerangs, and their owners clambered on top.

Sniffers were cajoled by their family and by the shame of being singled out. Reluctantly they climbed aboard. When there was no more room in the cage truck, private cars were commandeered and they joined the convoy: a motley collection of battered Holdens and Fords snaked its way around the community.

Meanwhile, I was at Peggy's camp, where swags and boomerangs etc. were crammed into the last two rows of seats on the school bus. Compared with the cage truck, the bus was the limousine of the operation: it had doors that opened and shut, all its windows were intact and there were padded seats. When the bus was half full of Peggy's possessions, we began to load her extended family's gear onto the roof – including steel tucker boxes and old Japangardi's two rifles for hunting kangaroo, one of which was held together with red-and-black electrical tape. Peggy's two old aunts, Topsy and Judy, climbed into the bus along with her mother, various in-laws and grandchildren. Peggy's eldest son, Scotty, loaded up his Kingswood ute as well. It had no bonnet and was missing a rear window.

Everyone was excited: 'We're moving back to Mt Theo!' It had just begun to drizzle and the afternoon sky turned grey and dark, but nothing could dampen this family's enthusiasm.

We joined the convoy as it did its final circuit of Yuendumu. There was always one more blanket to borrow from a relative in another household, so gathering the gear for one person required stopping at up to three different houses. Each stop was fraught with peril as the sniffers became increasingly restless at being caged up,

so every stop presented an opportunity and temptation to escape. Finally all the blankets were gathered and the convoy headed out west along the Tanami Road towards Mt Theo.

As I drove over the cattle grid that marked the boundary with Mt Doreen Station, Peggy began to tell me *Jukurrpa* information (Dreamtime stories) about the hills and ranges and creeks that we crossed.

‘That one over there belong to Jungarrayi and Japaljarri,’ she said.

‘How do I say that in Warlpiri?’ I ask, and then tried to remember my lesson sheets.

‘Yinya ngampu pirlu, Jungarrayi – Japaljarri kurlangu. Mai?’

‘*Yuwai Jangala, ngurrju*, you speaking Warlpiri now,’ Peggy enthused, pleased with my rough attempt to speak her tongue.

The rain hit the windscreen hard and the clay road turned to mush. At times I struggled to maintain control of the overloaded bus. Old Japangardi sang and another old traditional man, Shorty



Peggy Brown, founder of Mt Theo Program

Jangala, joined him in an ancient traditional song. I don't think I'll ever know enough Warlpiri to be able to grab the old language words out of traditional songs, so instead of translation I had to guess the meaning: 'We're going home'.

After Japangardi and Jangala's singing had gone quiet, Peggy addressed the group of passengers: 'This is how the Nyirripi community started. We going to make Mt Theo a big place, we gotta get shop and school and all.' Then turning to me, 'Yakajirri, you gotta get us a school teacher.'

Japangardi interrupted her to instruct me: 'Don't break any tree at Mt Theo and you gotta make sure no sniffer breaks any tree. That place has got really strong *Jukurrpa*, it's a dangerous place. If anyone breaks them trees there, they might get really sick.'

Carson, Japangardi's fourteen-year-old petrol sniffer son joined in, pleased to have the upper hand on this whitefella who thought he could boss the sniffers: 'You got to be really careful Yakajirri, those trees have really got *Jukurrpa*, but don't worry for those other sniffers, I'll tell them.'

The bus rattled on through the night. I strained my eyes wide open to spot bullocks before I hit them. The rain had stopped and old Japangardi was singing again.

After two hours we turned off the Tanami Road and followed the snaking Mt Theo track, a track that made the corrugated Tanami Road seem like a highway. After an hour of dodging pot holes and wheel ruts I could just make out an orange glow in the distance.

'First!' one of Peggy's grandchildren called out, claiming that he was the first to see the fire light.

'*Ngurrju ngurra*,' Japangardi said quietly as he rubbed my arm and looked at me with his old hunter's eyes, now grey with age. 'Good home.'

'*Yuwai Jangala*, good home Mt Theo,' said Peggy reiterating her husband's sentiment.

Soon afterwards we arrived to welcoming campfires already lit by people from the first vehicles in the convoy. Torch beams bumped around in the darkness as personal possessions were sought, found and fought over, the old ladies haggling with each other: 'That's my blanket! Leave it! You got the 'nother red one, this one mine! My one got the tiger picture on it.'

Old people's swags were rolled out while teenager sniffers chattered excitedly around the campfire, like school kids on the first night of an excursion.

Mt Theo

[Letter to Mr Bell, a close friend I've known since my last year at school. During the time I lived in Yuendumu he worked as an engineer in Kalgoorlie, Roxby Downs, China, and Canberra. We wrote personal letters and descriptions of our lives to each other.]

Dear Mr Bell

I am writing to you from an outstation, 150 km north west of Yuendumu. Its name is Mt Theo and the country looks grand – spinifex plain, lots of ghost gums growing and the round shapes of the hills of 'Puturlu' (Mt Theo).

My bed is rolled out on the red sand and I am sleeping 'warlu wana' (beside the fire). I am surrounded by people who also sleep next to fires, or under 'yujukus' (humpies) or rough bush-made shade shelters. As I began this letter the eastern sky was strong orange – but now the sun is fully up. Flies are buzzing round my face as I write. I have not heard a word of English spoken this morning, only Warlpiri (the local Australian language). One old man, Shorty Jangala, has been singing a traditional song this morning. Windbreaks here are made out of rough and gathered bush materials. There are buildings here, but no one camps in them, by preference because it's nicer to be outside bush way, than in a building. And also for spiritual



Solomon and Andrew Stojanovski (Yakajirri) camping at Mt Theo when the program first started – March 1994

reasons, an old person died sometime back and he camped by those buildings. His spirit is left quiet and the buildings are left alone. We've got a phone box too, with a solar panel on top. There is no other electricity out here.

People have lived here for a long time, this is their country, but I am here for a special reason. The people here have agreed to look after kids recovering from petrol sniffing. I bring petrol sniffers out from the settlement [Yuendumu] and give them to the people here who care for them while they de-tox. The kids learn lots about country and culture here; they go hunting, get bush tucker and the old blokes make lots of boomerang. They chase goannas down holes and dig them out and cook them. I drive out once a week to deliver food and supplies.

The Toyota is bogged at the moment, so I'll have to dig it out soon. I have a bush name: 'Yakajirri'. My whitefella name 'Andrew' has become 'kumunjayi' (a taboo word because someone with the same name has died recently and it would disturb their spirit to mutter their name – so my name is no

longer spoken). I asked to be given a new name. One old man, Darby Jampijimpa – who can remember time before whitefellas – gave me that name. Yakajirri was his father's bush name from a long time ago. His father had the same skin name as me, 'Jangala'. Our Dreamings are fire and water/rain. And our Dreaming is also Yakajirri – a little bush fruit.

The world of kinship

As well as my name Yakajirri, I also had a 'skin' name: Jangala, which determined my place in the Warlpiri universe. The Warlpiri kinship system is made up of eight 'skin' groups, with male and female skin names for each group:

<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
Nangala	Jangala
Nampijimpa	Jampijimpa
Nakamarra	Jakamarra
Napurrula	Jupurrula
Napanangka	Japanangka
Napangardi	Japangardi
Nungarrayi	Jungarrayi
Napaljarri	Japaljarri

Males and females in the same skin group are considered to be brothers and sisters. There are skin groups for each member of the family: fathers and mothers, uncles and auntys, grandparents, and mothers- and fathers-in-law. Everyone in Yuendumu has a skin name, and that is the title that most people are referred to by. Even whitefellas are given skin names, so that all the Aboriginal people can orientate the new whitefella in the kinship system.

The Warlpiri kinship system is very complex if you drill down into it, but at a basic level, the kinship/skin name system determines relationships: who a person can ask for food and other

things from; who they must avoid (for example, sons-in-law avoid mothers-in-law); who they must treat with respect; who they can tease (e.g. cousins, possible girlfriends/boyfriends); and who they cannot say 'no' to (e.g. people who they are obliged to give things to). For traditional hunter-gatherer life, the skin system was a highly functional social system that resolved potential conflicts in a small-scale society (by avoiding in-laws), and ensured that people were fed and looked after in the harsh desert environment.

Women's Centre Toyota

Each Friday after school, I collected rations from the store and ran them out to Mt Theo. I would usually use the school bus or if I was allowed the school Toyota (though that was fraught with politics), but often these vehicles weren't available so I would have to 'humbug' a vehicle.

The word 'humbug' was first used by whitefellas, then by Warlpiri, to describe what anthropologists call 'demand sharing'. Demand sharing is a social phenomenon in hunter-gatherer cultures where individuals are able to request certain kinsmen share food and other resources with them. These requests cannot be denied and are part of a reciprocal obligation system. Sociologically speaking, this system ensured the survival of the group in hunter-gatherer societies. In contemporary Yuendumu life young people are socialised into a culture of sharing, giving and demanding, that has its roots in the ancient hunting culture of the desert. Humbugging was a part of life at Yuendumu and I had to get hold of a vehicle.

Sometimes Frank at the Mining Company would lend me his Toyota and sometimes I would borrow the Council truck. But that afternoon it had to be the Women's Centre Toyota – the one they used for night patrol. Getting this Toyota was a bit of a process. I would first ask Joan, the whitefella who was the Women's

Centre coordinator. Joan would then refer my request to a group of elderly women who made up the vehicle committee. Like all organisations, the Women's Centre had a 'we don't lend out the Toyota' rule, which was inevitably broken by the very committee members who wrote it. To get a loan of the Toyota, you had to be good at humbugging.

There was a funeral and sorry business going on in Lajamanu, 600 kilometres to the north, and many people had gone to that, riding in the cage truck. One old Jampijimpa man from Mt Liebig had got a ride with the sorry business mob to Yuendumu, but had somehow missed the ride to Lajamanu. He was angry: 'That mob been leave me behind.' He had been stranded outside the Women's Centre with his swag, billycan and boomerangs. He was eyeing the Women's Centre Toyota and insisted he get a ride to Lajamanu. But the Toyota had been promised to me by then to do the Mt Theo run. Joan explained the situation to me. I could still borrow the Toyota, but I had to take the old man with me. After I delivered the rations to Mt Theo, I had to catch up with the cage truck and deliver the old man. He was angry and he was going to hit all the women with his boomerangs if they didn't give him a ride to Lajamanu in the Toyota.

Andrew Cowen, one of the school teachers, and I picked up the Toyota and the old man, and drove to Mt Theo. When we arrived, the young men rushed up to us and presented us with some stone axes they had found while exploring around the outstation. The axes were made of white quartz. My friend Solomon said they must have been left by his grandfather who used to live around Mt Theo in the days before whitefellas.

It quickly grew dark. After the rations were unloaded, Cowen and I sat down for supper with Johnny Hooker Creek and his wife Molly. Johnny and Molly were a sweet old couple who would sit quietly by their fire next to their humpy (which was made out of bush timber and corrugated iron). Johnny and I often shared a

pipe of tobacco and drank tea together. Their camp was separated a little from the main camp at Mt Theo, which was a chaotic mix of teenage petrol sniffers, dogs and Peggy's family.

Some nights when I camped at Mt Theo, Johnny would tell me stories of his life. As a kid he grew up with his parents hunting and gathering. He was about six years old when the Coniston Massacre took place. The massacre party approached Aboriginal camps and shot people indiscriminately. This was in 1928. Johnny said his parents hid at Mt Theo; they climbed the mountain which was normally out of bounds and sang the mountain so that it grew taller. That's how they hid away.

As a young man after contact with whitefellas, Johnny got a job working with cattle and learnt how to ride a horse. He travelled widely doing stock work and droving. He was on several cattle drives from the Northern Territory across to Queensland. Once the Aboriginal stockmen's horses were sold or taken by the boss drover, Johnny had to walk back home on foot.

He worked up in the Top End where he had a reputation of being able to ride any 'wild horse'. He says the station-owner's daughter was watching him in the stockyard one day and was clearly impressed. He has a twinkle in his eye as he recalled that yarn.

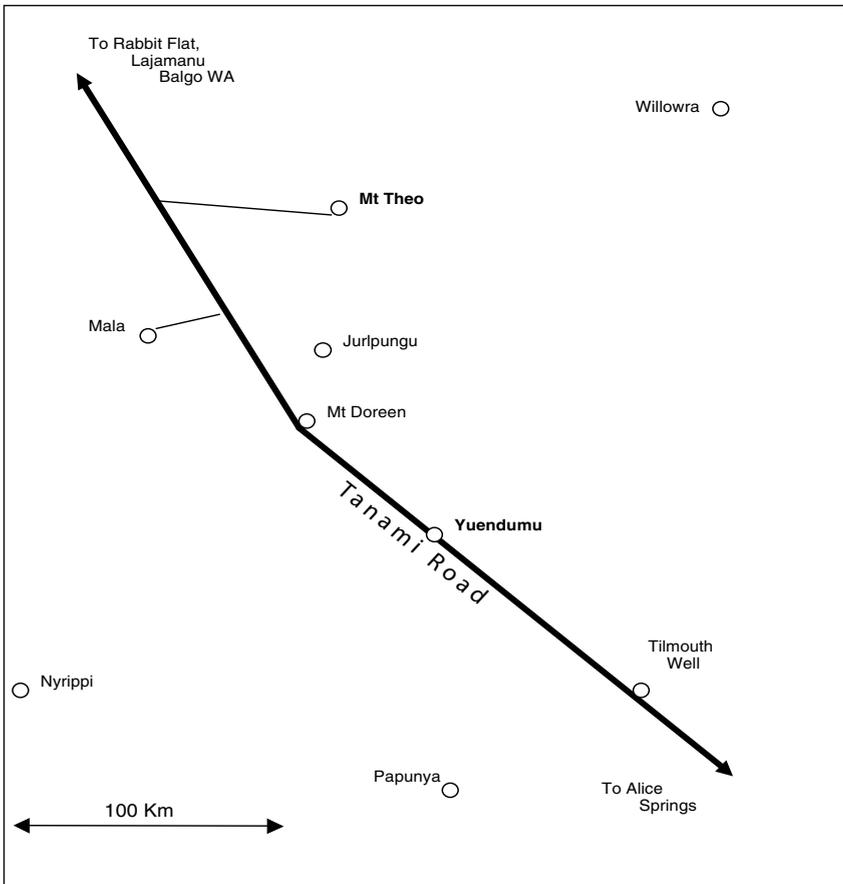
'Maybe I got white son or daughter,' he said grinning. He never told me if the station-owner chased him away.

In the Second World War, Johnny helped build roads and drive supply trucks for the war effort in 'front line' Australia.

He was sent from Yuendumu to Hooker Creek to build the new Warlpiri settlement of Lajamanu. He was sent away because he had the reputation of being a hard worker, but maybe also because he was a bit of a 'lover boy'. He got his name 'Hooker Creek' from that time.

Solomon's mother, Lucky Nampijimpa Langdon, also lived at Mt Theo. She camped away from the main camp near Johnny and

Molly. She was widowed, but had previously lived with her husband where the main camp was. Because her husband had passed away, the main camp was now a ‘no room’ zone for her. Under Warlpiri law, when a person passes away, their family must move immediately from their campsite and avoid that place for a long time, to allow the loved one’s spirit to settle. The public phone box was situated within the main camp, and therefore was a place where Lucky had ‘no room’. I learnt this one afternoon when Lucky’s son, Jimmy (who was my next door neighbour in Yuendumu), had asked me to tell Lucky to phone him from Mt Theo. When I passed this message on to Lucky she complained that she could not call Jimmy, as she had ‘no room’ near the phone box.



After supper Cowen, the old man Jampijimpa and I got organised to head off. Solomon and Carson (both sniffers) asked if they could come with us for the trip. They promised not to run away. As we left Mt Theo, the other young men, who we left behind, had settled into their swags and were singing love songs to the night.

Pina yantarniji (Please come back)

Pina yantarniji (Please come home)

Wangka pina karnangku nyuntuku (I am calling you back to me)*

We had a cage truck to catch. Joan at the Women's Centre said the cage truck and the sorry business mob were going to camp halfway to Lajamanu. Lajamanu is 600 kilometres from Yuendumu, so I reckoned halfway was 300 kilometres. We followed the Tanami Road west, past the Granites Goldmine, which was lit up like a Christmas tree in the desert night, past Rabbit Flat roadhouse and past the Tanami Goldmine. We then turned north up the Supplejack road. At midnight we found the cage truck, after a 450 kilometre drive and less than 200 kilometres out of Lajamanu.

Small campfires surrounded by families of swags were spread in a broad circle on either side of the road. Snoring bodies slept peacefully under the night sky. Some voices welcomed us to the camp as we unrolled our swags and crashed out.

In the morning my adoptive Warlpiri grandmother, Agie Napurrula, who was travelling with the sorry mob, cooked damper for me and Cowen. Carson and Solomon humbugged breakfast in a similar manner from their distant relations.

We were keen to visit Rabbit Flat (Australia's most remote roadhouse) on our return journey but we had no money. I asked Napurrula if I could humbug her and borrowed \$40. This is

* Song written by Lajamanu Teenage Band



Camping on the Lajamanu Road

something that some whitefellas often misunderstand: humbugging works both ways. Whitefellas tend to assume that humbug is a one-way street, of Yapa begging off Kardiya. But Kardiya can also engage in the humbug system. Lindsay Japangardi Williams, the football coach, once described the humbug system to me as ‘teamwork’.

The sharing of resources and doing of favours helps ratify relationships. Giving compassionately to another person is a practical expression of your relationship with them. It is an expression of the duty, care and love you have for that other person. Humbugging invites the other person to enter into a sharing relationship with you. Even though humbug will centre around an immediate need (such as ‘I want \$40 to spend at Rabbit Flat’), it also carries with it an implicit obligation of reciprocity. If you give to someone, they have a duty to give to you too.

At Rabbit Flat we enjoyed spending the \$40 that Napurrula had given me before we returned Solomon and Carson to Mt Theo and then home to Yuendumu.