

Dowsing Vindicated Part 1

Ken Clements arrived at Operation Crown in Thailand shortly after L/Cpl John Armitage's success at dowsing. People were still talking about it. A decent water supply made life easier for the men, and saved a major engineering project.

Operation Crown was the name of a military project relating to the construction of a 5000-foot runway in N.E. Thailand, near the Laotian border, starting early in 1963. Units of the Royal Engineers (commonly known as Sappers), various support troops, and a contingent of ANZAC soldiers were earmarked for the job.

The UK Government, despite its concerns over certain treaties and costs, authorised the proposed project, and planning started immediately.

Anyone who has been a victim of 'high-level planning' will know that this process sometimes overlooks important details. Operation Crown was no exception.

Site work commenced with the arrival of the sunburnt 11 Independent Field Squadron R.E. who relocated from Malaya and were

tasked with erecting a temporary tented camp to house the main construction crew scheduled to arrive from the UK within weeks. The joint force would then build a self-contained encampment for approximately 400 personnel plus all their equipment. I arrived later in 1964 as a replacement electrician.

A troop of the respected Royal Australian Engineers was embedded within 11 Sqn's ranks – a fact that turned out to merit the use of the adjective 'serendipitous' and would save the whole ill-conceived venture from literally turning into dust.

The panic started when some bright spark enquired, 'What about the water supply?' The query was passed to the planners in the UK who hastily ordered, 'Use any local supply available.' Oh! What a splendid idea!

The villagers quickly tired of water bowsers emptying their wells in one gulp, forcing our tankers to drive to the nearby border town of Mukdhan on the banks of the Mekong River to fill up.

Reports of British military vehicles lining up on the Thai/Lao ferry slipway soon reached the sensitive ears of our Military Attaché in Bangkok, who lit up like a torch and promptly put the river and all its tributaries off-limits.

'Let them drink beer!' was the popular cry from the Sappers.

The imminent arrival of 59 Sqn made the situation critical. I hadn't arrived when the following events occurred, and I must rely on semi-official and probably sanitised written versions and possibly eyewitness accounts. I lean towards the latter.

The Thai Department of Mineral Resources had already conducted



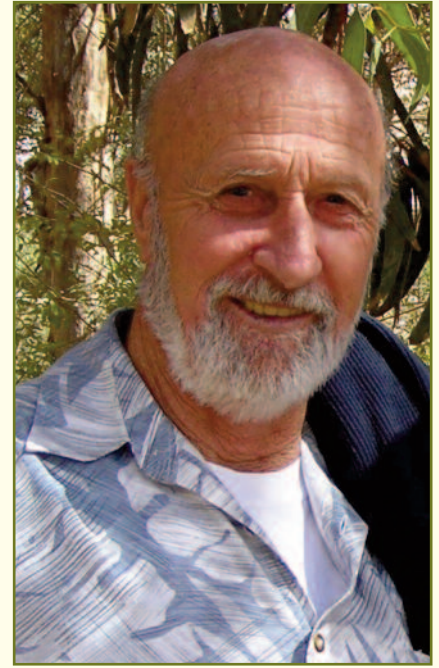
*L/Cpl John Armitage divining for water, watched by a local man.
'Army' the Soldiers newspaper, 14th May 1964. Photo: Hank Lawrence.<https://11indepfdsqn.blogspot.com>*



Commander of Royal Engineers, Colonel (Mad Mac) Harry McIntyre, M.C., later to become OBE.



Mad Mac in the hallowed R.E. ceremony of being the first to sample any newly found water supply.



John Armitage in October 2009, who passed away in May 2020. Photo: Alan Hodges.

a geological survey of the area, and had been drilling for water on their own initiative since before our arrival, but all of their 300 bore holes had been drier than a Pommy's towel, as our antipodean cousins would say.

As the critical day approached when there wouldn't even be enough water to make a decent cup of char, a saviour emerged from the rank and file.

According to both my information streams, up stepped our Aussie hero, L/Cpl John Armitage, and fronted up to the Commander of Royal Engineers, Colonel (Mad Mac) Harry McIntyre, with a proposal, an act of heroism in itself.

The junior NCO declared he was a skilled dowser and offered to pinpoint a productive water source in exchange for a week's leave and an issue of cold tinnies to every member of his troop. (These Aussies stick together.)

Mad Mac was a hard bargainer but was also desperate, so he accepted the offer with the proviso that failure would mean a period of field punishment for time-wasting.

The raucous scepticism and much derision displayed by the

geologist, the drilling team and even our officers at the sight of a hazel twig is surprising considering that water dowsing has a long military history, especially in the Royal Engineers.

It is unanimously agreed that John found a highly productive site in short order and another later on. Some informants whisper that he'd found the underground water before he made the bargain.

Immediately after the successful demonstration, swarms of village boys were observed wandering around with freshly harvested forked sticks and grubbing around in the sand.

John's wells went on to supply enough water to mix half-a-million tons of concrete plus enough for the daily needs of 400–500 soldiers for several years.

When he returned to Malaya, he reinforced his reputation by finding two more viable wells on a palm-tree plantation, deflecting any accusations of a fluke.

As Commanding Officer, tradition compelled Mad Mac to participate in the hallowed R.E. ceremony of being the first to sample any newly found water supply, no holds were barred.

With sincere thanks to the following people

John Hamnett and Neville Wareham of CreopCrown
Hank Lawrence
Alan Hodges
Mick Norton
Fay Canning, Secretary of 2 Field Troop Reunion Group.

Links:

[http://www.creopcrown.co.uk/Units/Others/Aussies/texts/Destination_Malaya_Chapter_3%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.creopcrown.co.uk/Units/Others/Aussies/texts/Destination_Malaya_Chapter_3%20(1).pdf)

When questions were asked in Parliament in 1934

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1934/jun/05/water-divining-salisbury-plain>

Next issue: Part 2 is about about another Australian Sapper, but this time in Gallipoli. He was described as an 'Occult Water Diviner' at the time.