

## Chapter 2

# I Love Happy People

*“I love people who make me laugh. I honestly think it’s the thing I like most, to laugh. It cures a multitude of ills. It’s probably the most important thing in a person.”* (Audrey Hepburn).

If there is one thing joy and laughter is effective in its relieving stress. I guess that’s why I have always loved people with a sense of humour; it’s a very endearing quality. Sometimes the world is smarter than the children of light, the world loves to laugh. Comedians are some of the highest paid entertainers, there are even ‘Laughing Clubs’ where you actually pay money for them to teach you to laugh! I have a pastor friend in New Zealand that should have been a comedian. He’s one of those naturally funny fellows that doesn’t have to tell jokes when he preaches - he’s just funny. He told me how he took some of his people to one of these ‘Laughing Clubs’ and they kicked him out! True story. He told me, “Col, they kicked me out because I couldn’t stop laughing!”

### **I Was Blessed With A Sense Of Humour**

My first job after leaving school was with stock agents Goldsbrough Mort & Co. working with cattle, sheep and pigs and I loved it. I guess I was about 17 years old at the time and some of the fellows in the business were tough blokes, hard drinking and harder swearing. It was an ‘old custom’ to test the mettle of us young blokes just starting out. They would send us up the street to the store to ask for things like ‘a long wait’, or a tin of ‘striped paint’. The blokes in the shop were in on the deal and would play along with it – milk the joke for all it was worth. One young fellow was sent to ask for a left-handed hammer, another was given

some old torch batteries and told go and have them recharged. They really loved taking the ‘Mickey’ out of us. Half the time we didn’t know if they were serious or not. They would roar with laughter every time they succeeded in making a new employee look like a total idiot.

Now I may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I do know when someone is having a ‘lend of me’ and so I just bided my time. I got a hold of the largest firecracker I could find – it was a doozie, it could blow a letter-box to smithereens. One day I was in the office when the worst practical joker in the company walked outside to go the toilet. We had one of those outdoor concrete ‘dunnies’, solid as a rock. Unbeknown to me the fellow actually walked right by the toilet and into the shed next door. Happy in my ignorance I thought it was my God given opportunity to get even – vengeance at last! I slipped outside, lit the wick of the giant bungler and rolled it under the door. I could hardly keep a straight face as I heaved on the door to make sure there was to be no escape. Boom! The whole dunny reverberated and rocked with the sheer concussion of the blast. I mean the door lifted off its hinges! I could feel the shock wave hit my legs – and I was on the outside! The noise and shock wave inside must have been terrific!

I stood there sporting this great stupid grin as the door slowly swung open. And then the smoke cleared to reveal the red face of the Manager of the company, sitting on the dunny - pants down and with a look of sheer terror in his eyes! I almost got fired over that little escapade! It’s just as well the boss had a sense of humour, even though he didn’t display it that day! To me this was all a part of growing up. I loved those days. I wouldn’t trade these memories for anything

Today, escapades such as this would probably lead to a lawsuit. The world seems to have lost its sense of humour and is always looking for someone or something to blame.

## **I Can't Imagine Life Without Humour**

No true Aussie bloke likes to think of himself as a wimp; we don't relate well to that at all. I remember how badly I related to one myself, (before I was a Christian of course!) One of the businessmen in my town was a skinny little bloke that was always hounding me to take him out shooting and fishing. Let's just call him Alex, although Ned Flanders might be closer to the mark! Alex was a skinny little POM who truly had the gift of the gab. Mate, he could talk underwater with a mouth full of marbles. But Alex had never been off the bitumen road in his entire life - 'bitumen road safari boys' we used to call them. Strangely though, he thought of himself as a real 'outdoorsman'.

At the time we had a fishing shack in the middle of Lake Alexandrina on a tiny speck of dirt called Ram Island. The shack itself was made out of rusty galvanized iron and was rough and ready – barely holding together, but it served our purpose. We just used the place to store our fishing gear and to sleep. The island was crawling with snakes, I kid you not. There was everything from tigers to deadly browns and blacks and it was my job to clear them out, a chore I loved. (I can feel the love coming from the tree huggers). The place was an outdoorsman's paradise and Dad and I loved it. We would go up there to fish, shoot and get away from the world. We had introduced kangaroos and wild goats to keep the vegetation in check.

And so in a moment of 'temporary insanity' I agreed to take old Alex duck shooting. But on the boat trip something happened that got my hackles up good and proper. I was standing in the bow as we cruised along, when suddenly a shot rang out and a bullet whistled right past my ear. Spinning around I saw Alex standing with his rifle still smoking. I was literally so mad I was fuming, yet he just looked at me nonchalantly and yelled: "I saw a duck up there!"

“I’ll give you b\*\*\*\*\* duck!” I mumbled to myself as I fumed, still shaking with half rage, half sheer terror at coming so close to a bullet in the head. I ripped into him good and proper, still mumbling to myself; “The bloke’s as thick as a brick. Definitely doesn’t have both oars in the water.”

So I deviously started to plot my revenge. He had picked on the wrong bloke! On the island we had an old galvanised iron dunny, located well away from the main shack. Dad and I often used it for target practice. We’d blast away at the iron walls so we could see the imprint of the shotgun patterns. After we settled in I strolled down to the old dunny and banged off a couple of shots into the walls when Alex appeared and called, “I have to go to the toilet!”

And then with a very nervous glance at me he added. “And I want you to promise me you won’t shoot while I’m in there!” he pleaded. I lowered my gun with a mock look of dismay and said; “Alex I’m really disappointed in you mate. Do you really think I’d even consider doing such a terrible thing to you! Why I’m crushed, that’s totally unthinkable!” Secretly grinning, ah, revenge at last! Alex strolled gingerly down to the outhouse and with a reluctant glance back at me, disappeared inside the old ‘thunder-box’.

A few moments passed before his head shot out the door to check that I wasn’t up to any skull-duggery. I just stood there looking ever so innocent, waiting my chance. After a few moments of silence I picked up a great lump of timber, sneaked down to the back of the old outhouse and with one almighty swing I whacked that piece of wood into the side of that old dunny with every ounce of strength I possessed. Bang! And the rusty iron shook and reverberated like jelly on a plate. Instantly there was a blood-curdling scream from within and the door swung open. Out shot Alex, pants down around his ankles, screaming. “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! You’ll kill me! Stop! Stop!”

I fell on the ground in hysterics. I just couldn't stop laughing. And it couldn't have happened to a nicer bloke! I don't know why but that was the last time old 'Bitumen Road Alec' ever went shooting with me!

### **Moving To Darwin**

For a number of years I had run sporting goods stores in Victor Harbour and then we decided that we wanted to do something more adventurous with our lives. We contemplated moving to New Guinea, Thailand or Bali but finally settled on moving north, way north, as far as you can get north - Darwin. It was a move that was to dramatically change our lives forever and was the greatest move we ever made - to God's own country! Looking back on those days it seems like it was only yesterday.

Darwin in the late 1960s was a frontier town where they still drove cattle down the streets. In fact not long after I arrived I was walking down one of the main streets when a run-away steer came bolting around the corner and almost wiped me out. The steer had broken free from a mob and stampeded through the town. It never even stopped for a red light! When you try to explain the sheer size of the north and its tiny population they can't believe it. The Americans love raving on about Texas and their cattle 'ranches' and are surprised when we tell them we have cattle stations, such as Victoria River Downs, that are the size of Belgium. The property was 13 to 14,000 square miles, you could ride 150 miles in a straight line and still be on VRD!

One time we were in a meeting where Pastor



Kenneth Hagin Jr was raving on about how big Texas was. Jan piped up and yelled, “We’ve got cattle stations bigger than that here mate!” Pastor Hagin was shocked and said: ‘Who said that?’ As the congregation burst into laughter.

When we arrived in Darwin, croc shooting was still legal, in fact there were no limits on the fishing or shooting. Come to think of it there were hardly any restrictions on anything in those days. It was a ‘tree-hugger’, ‘crystal-licker’ and ‘dolphin-kisser’ free zone, an outdoorsmen’s paradise.

There was just no other place like it. I started off managing Davies Sports Depot - the biggest sports store in town. It was owned by “Tungsten” Ted Davies - and they didn’t come any harder than old Ted. Mate, any tougher and he would have rusted! The store was a great place to meet people; every barramundi fisherman, buffalo or croc shooter and cattleman in the Top End came through those doors. Talk about rough, these were some of the toughest blokes you could expect to meet. But most were genuinely good fellows, the salt of the earth and I loved their bush humour - that dry, laconic Aussie sense of humour. For example; chances that people venturing out bush to a place called ‘Shady Camp’ (no doubt named by some wag) would expect to find a lush, green, shady oasis. Hey, a name like ‘Shady Camp’ conjures up such images, but you arrive to find there isn’t a tree for miles! Shady Camp, huh! Like the name given to the worst rogue croc in the history of the N.T. - ‘Sweetheart’! Only an Aussie could come up with that one!

### **Snakes In The Store**

One wildlife ranger was a regular customer and I had asked him to bring me in an olive python skin. I wanted to make a belt. “No worries mate, I’ll get ya one!” He said.

Friday night was always the big night out in Darwin; country comes to town! Every man and his dog came to do their shopping, drinking, fighting or anything else they

planned. I still remember the night. I was standing in the store showing a fellow a new rifle, when suddenly the door swung open wide and a very drunken ranger staggered in. “Hey Col!” he bellowed at the top of his voice. “Here’s the b..... snake you wanted!”

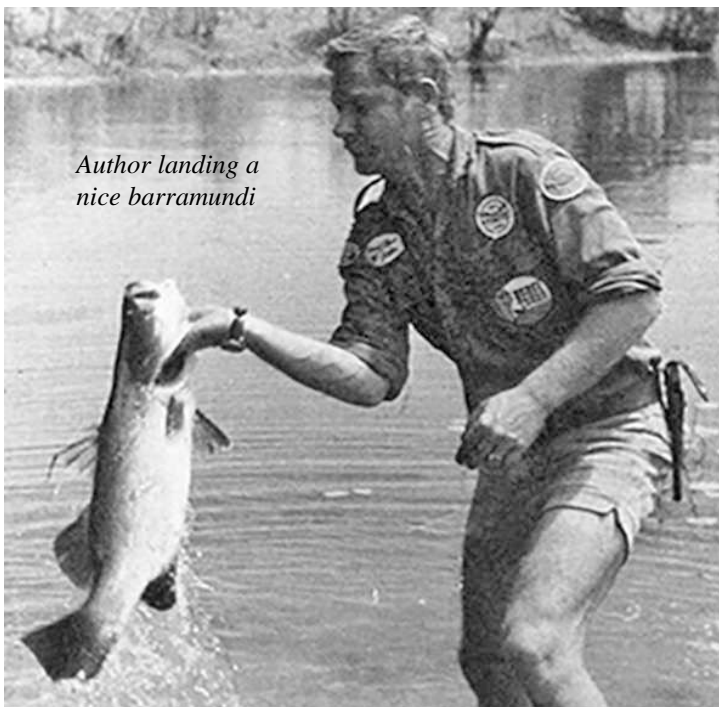
I kid you not. With that he slipped a bag from his shoulder and emptied the contents on the floor. You guessed it; it was a huge, very alive, very active, writhing snake. Now admittedly the snake was a harmless olive python, but it’s hard to distinguish the difference between them and a deadly king brown at the speed this bloke was moving! There was instant panic and pandemonium as half the customers took one look at the writhing reptile, screamed and bolted out the door. One guy literally leaped up onto the counter. Old Tungsten Ted went ballistic; I thought I was going to lose my job over that little fracas.



Blokes were running, sheilas were screaming and kids were howling. Finally I managed to whip the snake into a bag and hurl it into the bait deep freeze. That put the 'joe blake' into a state of hibernation immediately. Meanwhile the offending ranger staggered out the door laughing his head off. He couldn't see a problem; in fact he thought it was a great joke! You see I forgot to mention to the great yobbo that I wanted the snake alright – but I took it for granted it would be dead! Strange how some blokes have such a weird sense of humour!

### **The Barra Fishing Comp**

I remember a time when I was desperate to win the Darwin Barramundi Fishing Competition. As one of the owners of Fishing and Outdoor World I knew it would be great for business, not to mention the prestige for the old ego. So I drove half the night to this remote bush creek, whipped out the old rod and reel and got stuck into it. The place was a





fishermen's heaven, I kid you not. I sat there on a log, sipping on a Coke, watching literally dozens of big fish in the billabong. Believe it or not, these barra were lying in the shade of some paperbark trees, their dorsal fins clearly visible as they waved above the muddy surface of the water. Mate, I was dribbling down the side of my mouth!

After a while I flicked my ABU 6000C bait caster reel and lobbed a tantalising lure right in front of a beauty. The giant fish hit that thing with the force of an express train and the action was on. The fish proved to be an 18lb (8 kilo) barra and I was playing it on just 6 lb (2.5 kilo) line. That darned fish led me a merry old dance up and down that waterhole until finally he slipped under a pandanus palm root and snagged my line. I was desperate; I wanted to win that trophy so badly I could taste it. So I slipped off my 'duds', jumped into the water in my underpants, swam out to the spot it was snagged, duck dived down and freed the line. By the time I came up I realised the current was sweeping me along with it. In the Wet season these waterholes, bush creeks and rivers often become roaring torrents from the huge rainfall.

But there was no way that I was going to lose that fish! I could see that trophy in my cabinet. So I hung on for dear life. It sure must have looked a funny sight, this remote creek with a bloke in his underpants swimming along with a rod and reel waving above his head. As I swept around a bend there right before me was this mob of tourists camped on a sandbar. They just stood there gobsmacked as this lunatic fisherman staggered out of the water in saggy baggy 'Y' front undies and greeted them with, "G'day", turning bright red with embarrassment at the same time. With that I floundered out of the water, with my beautiful 8 kilo fish and strolled nonchalantly past the dumfounded tourists and said; "It's ok mate! This's my pet barra 'Bertie' and I was just takin' him out for his daily swim!"

## **Never Smile At A Crocodile!**

Let me put you straight, I am not trying to make out that I'm some great hero. I'm no 'Steve Irwin', but I have been charged by wild buffalo and a wild pig, had my Toyota 4WD rammed by one very irrate buffalo, but bear them no illwill - but I do hate crocs! We lost our Labrador dog to a croc. So, I guess it goes without saying that a sense of humour goes a long way to helping you survive in the outback

Of course crocs are protected now, so one can't just go around shooting them. It's ok for them to eat us, that's just par for the course. But us shoot them, well if you do - you're prison ministry is about to start!

When we first moved to Darwin in the 1960s croc shooting was still legal. We used to sell croc heads, feet, teeth and skins in the sports store I managed. Many of the shooters would come into the shop to purchase their guns and ammo, which gave me the chance (and privilege) to meet and talk to them. Sure they were rough, tough, hard men; they had to be to survive in the bush. But like I said, most of them were real, genuine blokes – as we say in Aussie. Some of those fellows were the salt of the earth - the type you could rely on in a tough spot. I really love the bush humour. I remember my first pair of croc skin boots; I had to shoot five of the blighters before I found one wearing boots!

One of my funniest encounters with crocs (if you can have such a thing) took place while I was taking a couple of Japanese honeymooners out bush. One morning I got a call from the N.T. Tourist Bureau; they had this couple who wanted to take a safari into the Outback to do some wildlife photography, and the promise was for a large tip. I was hooked and so we headed off, in my 'Tojo' (Toyota Land Cruiser). My clients from the Land of the Rising Sun wanting to stop every few miles to snap everything that moved from goannas to green ants! We crossed the wild Daly River and

drove on to a place I know that is a wildlife paradise – Mission Hole. I have seen a million birds on these wetlands. In those days it was a place totally untouched by man. If you fired a gun the sky came alive with every type of waterbird you could think of, black, wood, teal and burdekin ducks, magpie geese, egrets, blue cranes, brolgas, jabirus, white-breasted sea eagles, kites, hawks, brahminy kites, kingfishers and a host of other birds. Wild pigs, wallabies, ‘roos, snakes, biggest mobs (I love that old Territory term) of dingos and of course – the ever present crocs – added to the ‘wilderness’ appeal of the place!

We arrived in the late afternoon and instantly the problems started. My Nipponese mate and his missus spoke zilch English while my Japanese was restricted to “Toyota”, “sushi” and “Sayonara”! So I knew we were in trouble!

I tried my best to explain to the couple that while I unloaded the boat and set up camp, they could explore around to see what they might like to photograph. And with that the couple went off to snap green ants and frill necked lizards. After unloading the boat I slipped it into the water, deciding I would cruise the billabong to see what was happening.



The first thing I noticed was all the croc activity. Man this waterhole was full of ‘mud geckos’. After a while I glanced back towards the campsite and almost fell overboard with shock. The Japanese couple were splashing about in waist deep water like they were in some ritzy resort, totally oblivious to the danger. People have been eaten by crocs in these waterways and these two were merrily swimming! I screamed frantically at the top of my lungs, waving my arms to attract their attention. “Get out of the water you nuts! Are you trying to commit hari-kari?” I yelled. “The place is full of crocs!” I hollered and waved madly.

Finally I caught their attention, but they thought I was just being friendly and so they waved back excitedly. “Get out of the water!” I yelled. “Have you gone troppo or do you just have a death wish?” They responded by smiling and nodding and waving back, I guess they thought I was an Aussie nut or just an overexcited safari guide. I thought I was going to be carting them back to Darwin in a body bag!

Then an idea flashed through my mind. Forming my hands into the shape of a croc head I moved them up and down to indicate a snapping croc. “Croc!” I yelled again and again. “Get out of the water! There are crocs in this water you drongos!”

They smiled and waved as they splashed about oblivious to the danger. “Clock, what is clock? They yelled. Finally I just gunned the motor and screamed back to the camp, shooting the little ‘tinny’ right up onto the grass in my haste. Jumping out I raced over and literally dragged

my Oriental friends from the water. But do you think I could make the couple understand what I was on about. They just grinned from ear to ear, nodded and politely bowed. So I dragged them into the boat, raced back into the



centre of the billabong and proceeded to show them some of the denizens of the deep - the local resident crocs! It was hilarious to watch their little oriental faces change from joy to sheer terror.

When we arrived back at camp two very chastened sushi-eaters scrambled ashore, grabbed their gear, climbed up into the luggage rack of my 4WD Toyota and settled down for the night. No amount of coaxing or badgering could bring that couple back down on terra firma. No sir, they were definitely not impressed with Hermit Hill and refused to budge! “You one clazy Australian!” was about the only part of their murmuring I understood.

### **A World Record Shark**

In the 1970s I was fortunate enough to be awarded the prestigious ‘Mariner (Outboard) Australian Fishing Writer of the Year Award’. It was a real honour to be chosen from all the fishing writers in the country. I had been writing the fishing column for the NT News and a number of fishing magazines for some time and it was then that I got a crazy idea- I was going to catch a big shark. (With all the controversy about shark culling at the moment this should score me a few letters!)

And so I rounded up a bunch of mates and ‘Biggles’ - my brother-in-law, and we headed off to conquer the world. After all, we were young and indestructible! We set off for Grose Island; a couple hours run down the coast from Darwin. These waters are a fisherman’s paradise, or at least they used to be back in the 70s. Here we would troll a garfish and watch the queen fish and turrum (giant trevally) literally fight over the bait. But we also knew that these same waters were crawling with sharks - big hammerheads. We anchored off one of the sandbars, spread burley and slipped our baits over the side. Before long dorsal fins broke the surface and circled the boat. I wound in my line, waited for the biggest

'Noah' to cruise by and simply tossed the bait to him! Really it was as simple as that, zip skill was necessary. In a flash the big hammerhead grabbed and wolfed down my bait, hook line and sinker. The action was on, Lights! Camera! Action!

I sat back to take the weight of the killer as I knew this could turn out to be a long and drawn out affair. That big old shark ran out my line for what seemed an eternity. I was worried he was going to strip me clean and so I applied the brakes on my ABU 9000 game reel, all to little affect. A bit like trying to stop a truck with a spider web. Fortunately for me the shark turned and headed back towards us again. The action went on for hours. He'd run and drag line from the reel; I'd fight him and then gradually win back line by pumping the rod with all my strength. I knew the shark was big, just not how big! Three hard hours later I got my first glimpse of the dirty great thing!

With 'Biggles' on the tail rope and Georgie Voukolos on the gaff we were ready, this was exciting stuff and the adrenaline was pumping big time. Finally I got the big 'Noah's Ark' right under our boat and then with some sheer brute power I started pumping him towards the surface. When the shark finally flashed into view I nearly fainted. It was 'gi-normous'! In fact it was so big that I yelled with fright. The 12-13 foot shark was as big as our 14 foot boat!

There was no way we were going to be able to get that thing onboard; well not with me staying on board there wasn't anyway! I was going to have to wear it down, drown the monster and then tow it back to the weighing scales in Darwin. As I was only using a 20 pound rig, a ratio of 14 or 15 to 1, I couldn't afford to make mistakes or it would bust off and be gone in a flash. As the big shark breached the surface it rolled revealing a huge white underbelly. That was a sight that put the wind up us good and proper!

But I wanted that shark; in fact I made up my mind he was mine! So as the big 'Noah' hit the surface I yelled to

George to sink the gaff - which he promptly did, but it caused the shark to panic and drench us all in an eruption of spray. "Slip the tail rope on!" I bellowed at Biggles, standing in a daze like a kamikaze pilot on his 20<sup>th</sup> flight.

It was easy for me to call the shots; I was a long way from the thrashing tail. George rammed the gaff home as Biggles dropped the tail-rope over the thrashing tail. "Piece of cake!" I thought to myself as I started laughing.

I mean, maybe I'm a nut, but at least I'm a happy nut! George grinned and said; "Now don't let him bluff ya Col!" I didn't answer, I was just happy! And then all hell broke loose. The shark began a 'death roll' in the water, until it smashed the gaff (admittedly not big enough for the job), leaving poor old Biggles (alone) holding onto one huge and very irate hammerhead shark by the tail rope. That wiped the smile off my 'dial' real quick!

As the shark thrashed around I thought we were going to lose my brother-in-law. How he wasn't pulled over the side I'll never know. I screamed at him, "Drop the tail-rope, let it go! Drop it or you're gonna be shark bait!"

Biggles, not waiting for a second opinion, dropped it like it was an application for a job interview. In a flash I



*Don't let 'im bluff ya mate!*

took up the slack on the rod and was back in a battle with the shark. It ended up taking us something like 4-5 hours to beat that big guppy.

Finally we managed to haul the shark halfway up the back of the boat. We were deadbeat; it had been a very tiring but successful day. That 'Noah' was just over 12 feet in length and won me a Swedish Gold Medal from ABU. (I hadn't landed the big fella' within the rules of the Game Fishing Association so I didn't try to claim it as a record).

It's called teamwork, male bonding - call it what you like. It's about mates enjoying themselves together, the joy of being alive – it's called 'life more abundantly'!

### **Choppers In The Bush**

Some of my fondest memories of the Territory are connected to flying. In the early days I used to fly out to Arnhem Land with Graham Ball in his twin engine Beechcraft Baron. We'd jump in the 'Baron', fly out and land on the beach strip at Coburg and spend the day fishing. It was heaven to me! One time we hired a chopper to photograph buffalo and wild horses. We were flying really low, right behind a mob of stampeding brumbies as they bolted through the swamp splashing spray all over us with their flying hooves. We were so close I felt like I could have leaned out and touched a galloping stallion. I was having the time of my life when I glanced over at poor old Greg Biddell. He was as white as a sheet. "You'll have to take me back to camp, I'm feeling really crook!" he said. One glance at his colour was enough to see that. But this was the chance of a lifetime. We had even flown over a croc nest as this big old momma crocodile leaped up at us, snapping at the helicopter's landing skids. Leave? He had to be kidding. I wanted to shoot more film. Besides it cost a fortune to rent the chopper! So guess what we did? We dropped Greg on this tiny island right smack in the middle of the swamp.





Yep, right there in the middle of snakes, crocs, buff and brumbies. And there he stayed until we finished our pics and came back to pick him up. It cost old Greg a hundred bucks to sit there in the boonies and throw up! It's a wonder we never killed the poor bloke!

Some of the chopper pilots in the north were ex Vietnam vets. I remember flying over to Bathurst Island with one bloke nicknamed 'Rambo'. You wouldn't have to be a rocket scientist to work out why. We flew like a bat-out-of-hell at about 6-7 metres above the water and then landed on the beach and went fishing. The fishing in these remote spots is great, an untouched wilderness and from a chopper. It doesn't get any better than that, believe me!

During the flight old Rambo looked at me with a smirk and said: "Col, these Squirrels are the only choppers that can perform a loop!" I just sat there dumbfounded; there was no way he was going to do that while I was in the helicopter. So I just smiled and said: "Not today buddy! That's unless you want me to fill up your plane for you!" Rambo just laughed a wicked little guffaw and flew on. Come to think of it now, he actually did look like Rambo! Looking back on these adventures now it seems almost surreal. Can you imagine being paid to take people hunting, fishing and photographing crocs and eagles? Awesome memories. I love it; the bush, the wildlife, the people and their humour! But remember, never smile at a crocodile!

