

## Australian Volunteers International 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Talk given by Jemma Purdey

Herb Feith was the first Australian graduate volunteer to Indonesia, taking up a position in the Indonesian civil service in July 1951. This initiative was partly his own, influenced by his teacher and mentor at Melbourne University, Professor of Political Science, William Macmahon Ball. But it was also very much a group concern together with his friends and fellow students in response to a call made a year earlier to Melbourne University delegates by their Indonesian contemporaries at the International Student Service Conference in Bombay, to help build their new nation. With the particular help of Molly Bondan, an Australian woman married to an Indonesian revolutionary and former prisoner of the Dutch, who had worked for the revolutionary and now Republican government – Herb found a job with its Ministry of Information. Meanwhile, the small committee of Melbourne students set up to establish more formal structures to enable graduates to go to Indonesia and take up similar positions, received advice from Ball and Student Christian Movement leader, Frank Engels, about how to approach both governments and seek their approval for what they called the Volunteer Graduate Scheme (VGS) and about how to recruit Australians willing to go. By mid-1951, these activities were well advanced, with the important next step being to have someone on the ground to test its viability and to establish contacts with government and non-government agencies that would benefit from the work of such volunteers.

### *First impressions*

Herb departed from Port Melbourne on the Italian ship *Surriento* on 16 June 1951, together with mostly European passengers returning home after spending a period of refuge in Australia. Two weeks later he arrived into Tanjung Priok harbour. He was the only disembarking passenger and, as no continuing passengers were allowed to go ashore, he boarded the motorboat sent to ferry him into port alone. Refusing offers from porters to carry his bags, Herb was met by his host and now mentor, Molly Bondan. His first impressions of Jakarta and its bureaucracy are recorded in one of the first of what were to become his famous circular or 'chain' letters home:

No trouble with the military guard at the port, and we're on our way in this same truck to the town of Djakarta and through to Kebayoran. A terribly exciting trip! You couldn't imagine any city more conspicuously lacking in any semblance of planning of the most primitive sort. Roads, paddocks, railway lines, swamps, house stores, factories, literally all over the place ... If the group project committee sends out any town planning architects, there'll be plenty of work for 'em ...

Herb cast his eye across Jakarta and saw a world of possibility for his fellow Australian graduates who wanted to come to Indonesia, still war-ravaged, to help

them build a new nation. He described his first weeks in Jakarta as some of the most exciting and exhilarating of his life. His letters to his friends and family three weeks after his arrival reveal that he was immediately and deeply engaged in his work, with the people he met, and with the social problems he saw, which he very quickly took on as his own.

He was warmly welcomed into the Bondan home in Kebayoran where he lived for several weeks before moving in to other government-provided accommodation. Herb knew very little Indonesian language at this stage and was critically aware of the importance of speaking Indonesian so that he could really get to know the people and the place and though he was also frustrated by his slow progress (ie. this was just weeks in), by November he was confidently conversing in Bahasa. He was content to fall in with the rhythms of Jakarta life, living among people with whom he worked, meeting neighbours as he cycled to and fro. In the Ministry of Information's foreign languages section he wrote bulletins, translated speeches and occasionally broadcast English-language commentary on radio. For a twenty-one year old graduate fresh from urban Melbourne, it was exciting and important work.

But Herb quickly discovered there were also considerable frustrations brought on by the slow pace of life and of work especially. In a pamphlet Herb wrote for prospective volunteer graduates a few months later, whilst he highlighted the mutual benefits, great needs and importance of the work to be carried out by Australian volunteers, Herb was also careful to present a frank appraisal of the work environment:

Indeed no one thinking of working in Indonesia should underestimate the frustrations that he is likely to experience as a result of bureaucratic procrastination, casualness and confusion. Lack of funds, lack of equipment, lack of appropriate personnel, lost files, internal factionalism, personal, political and racial animosities and corruption – one must learn to live with all of these. And while it is all understandable ... it is very hard to put up with in practice, when one is trying to get something worthwhile done.

The electricity supply was unreliable, buildings were hot and uncomfortable, and avoiding dengue fever, stomach bugs and the like almost impossible. Nonetheless, despite the difficulties of everyday life and work in Jakarta, Herb found no lack of excitement and interest in his own work and more broadly, with the Indonesia he would go on to devote his life's work to understanding.

Just over six months later, due to the efforts and persistence of its small and hard-working committee in Melbourne, which included Don Anderson, Jim Webb, Vern Baily and Betty Evans (later Feith), together with Herb's work on the ground in Jakarta, the Graduate Employment Scheme was officially recognised by both governments in early 1952. The Australian government would cover the cost of passage and provide each volunteer with a bicycle for transport, and the Indonesian government would provide employment at the standard local salary. That year, two more volunteers, Gwenda Rodda and Ollie McMichael, joined Herb in Jakarta. Herb

was largely responsible for finding them their jobs at the Eijkman Scientific Research Institute and at the Ministry for Communication respectively and arranging for the conditions of their employment. Volunteers already in-country would find employment, housing and so on for those who followed. This was to be the nature of the scheme for many more years and required great organisational effort, and fast learning of the ins and outs of Indonesia's complex bureaucracy.

### *Pegawai ethos and world view*

In her history of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme former volunteer Betty Feith (nee Evans) (1954-56; 1997-99) described the adoption of the Indonesian term *pegawai* (civil servant), not only as a name for the volunteers but also as an all-embracing term to capture the essence of their commitment in Indonesia. In the second half of 1954, when Herb and Betty (now married) returned to Jakarta as a couple for two more years, the Australian volunteers formed a still small but dynamic group that included Ian Doig, Betty and Herb, Ailsa Thomson and Harry Whitfield. Volunteers Allison Frankel and Gwenda Rodda were also nearing the end of their terms. Inspired to join the Scheme by a drive to be useful in some way, the volunteers quickly developed a common way of relating to and living in Indonesia.

This group 'ethos' was evident in early September 1954 when the volunteers took a day trip to Bogor with a group of expatriate Americans and some Indonesians. The Americans travelled together by car, whereas the Australians piled into a bus with the Indonesians. The Americans brought with them an elaborate picnic, which included as Ailsa Thomson recalled: 'everything else, except the refrigerator, - including tablecloths'. In great contrast to this, indeed deliberately so, the volunteers unpacked their lunch. They had picked and washed banana leaves from their garden and wrapped in them a simple meal of rice and vegetables. For Herb and the other Australians, it was much more than a lunchtime snack; it symbolised an emerging style of behaviour and identity among the volunteer graduates. This demonstration and their approach in general was entirely deliberate and strategic in its aims. In a report on the Scheme compiled in late 1954 on behalf of the volunteers then in Indonesia, Herb explained:

...these young people assert by the way they live, that racial equality is real. By having natural and friendly relations with Indonesians on a basis of mutual respect, they help to do away with the colonial legacy of mistrust and misunderstanding, which to so large an extent continues to affect relations between coloured people and white (in Feith, B. 1984: 14).

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On 2 November 2001, a day before his 71<sup>st</sup> birthday, Herb was in Jakarta for an occasion such as this one tonight, to launch a photographic exhibition marking 50 years of AVI in Indonesia. The fallout from September 11 and its implications for policies closer to home had preoccupied Herb in recent weeks and he was fearful of

the turn Australian and international politics had taken and was rallying for a new fight. Never one to pass up an opportunity to impart a message when he had a captive audience, Herb made no exception on this occasion. He began with warm greetings to his many old friends, both Australian and Indonesian, but this was to be no nostalgic walk down memory lane. Herb's most pertinent comments were not specifically about Australia's relations with Indonesia or the volunteer scheme but about the state of Australia itself. I think they remain equally important for us today, 10 years later;

Looking at Australia today, it's certainly a lot more multicultural country than it was when our fifties group of volunteers came here, and it's a country which engages Asia in far more ways. But it's still a country in which first-world parochialism is a very powerful force. Australians who see themselves as citizens of a planet are still a pretty small minority, and that's become painfully clear to us, particularly recently over the asylum-seekers issue, over the people coming in tiny boats from long distances, and ultimately from places like Iraq and Afghanistan. And of course it's become clear to us as a result of the events of September the 11th in New York and Washington. The 'all the way with the USA' responses that have been so dominant in Australia have given all of us a great deal to ponder about and indeed a great deal to be anxious about. So those of us who believe in solidarity with Asians and people in other third-world countries still have an awful lot of battles to fight. But it's a happy thing that we've been empowered in relation to those battles by a lot of very valuable Indonesian friendships.

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