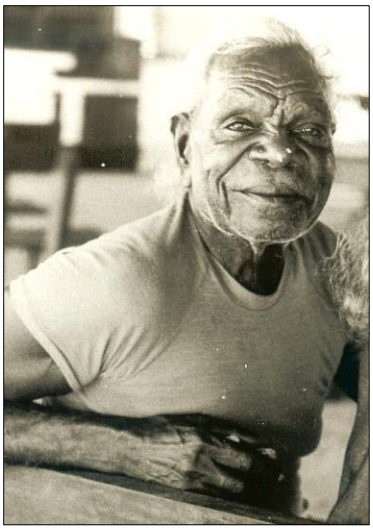


David Zahrt

Andumeri's Crocodile

by John Burbidge

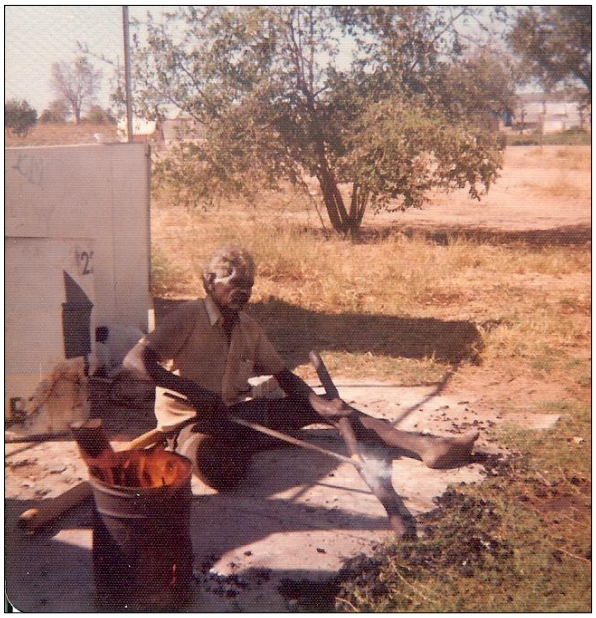
I had been in Oombulgurri just on a year. My short-lived career as a substitute teacher at the primary school had come to a close with the long-awaited arrival of Adrian Laurie-Rhodes. No one was gladder to see him than I. With no formal teacher training and just six months as a learn-as-you-go preschool teacher in a Chicago ghetto, I had dutifully taken this assignment as a stop-gap measure. When two months into my new role our school was paid an unexpected visit by no less than the federal minister for education and his entourage, I was ready to quit. My only consolation was my teaching "assistant", Reggie Meehan, who related to the children so well and was deeply committed to helping educate his own people. But I was so relieved when Adrian stepped off the plane, although I smiled when I saw his numerous suitcases laden with the latest teaching aids from his last job at a private school in Melbourne.

What to do with me now? I was not a mechanic, farmer, nurse or accountant like other members of our staff who had some useful skills. I had a degree in anthropology (with an emphasis on Australian Aboriginal studies) and had spent eight months as a probation and parole officer — my first job and one for which I cannot think I could have been more unprepared or unsuited. A short stint with the Parks and Gardens team proved a dead end, since most members of this august body preferred to play cards than bother with weeds and seeds. Then one of my colleagues suggested that I should work with the elders who spent most of their time carving boab nuts, making didgeridoos, or telling stories from their past before the mission days. At last I felt I had found my niche.

This group consisted of a core of half a dozen regulars and a few others who came and went. As they whittled away at their carvings, I used the opportunity to add to my knowledge of local languages by eliciting words and phrases from them and trying to put together simple sentences. I was the student and they the teachers. Occasionally, one of them would surprise me with a story or parts of a song cycle, which made me feel especially blessed. I was not the first *gadia* to have attempted doing this and certainly not the most qualified. Professional linguists and mission staff, including the author Randolph Stow and the anthropologist Phyllis Kaberry, had worked on language with members of this community over many years, but the results of their labors were stashed away in university archives or hidden in

inaccessible notebooks. I'd had a basic linguistics training but didn't possess the skills to pursue this as far as I would have liked. However, my meagre efforts did achieve one thing — a closer association with these senior members of the community and a growing sense of trust by them towards me.

One of this group, Ronald Morgan, or Andumeri, as was his tribal name, I grew particularly attached to. His bulbous face with its prescient eyes conveyed a deep sense of knowing that suggested there was much more to this man than a cursory glance might suggest. Although he was spare with words and spoke with a thin, raspy voice, I felt compelled to pay serious attention to whatever he said. Being around Andumeri inspired me, challenged me, and comforted me at the same time. I felt safe in his presence, yet totally out of my depth. I had a hunch that here was a man who had endured much in his lifetime and who carried untold vaults of wisdom within himself. But how to tap this wisdom seemed quite beyond me. At 26, I was young, naïve and inexperienced in almost everything. Yet I had a gnawing feeling that I was in the presence of someone who, along with his aged-old culture, would soon pass on into history. Time was not on my side.



Teresa Lingafelter

Frank Martin making a didgeridoo

As it turned out, Andumeri made the first move. He dropped subtle hints that he had been thinking about going bush, hunting as he and his forebears had done before the mission. He was not interested in chasing cattle or fishing for barramundi, activities that often involved groups of people. He longed to get away on his own and melt into the landscape, maybe spear a kangaroo or rock wallaby or perhaps a King Brown. As we chatted, I mentioned that I would love to join him and was delighted when he agreed. I arranged for one of our staff to drive us north of the settlement and drop us where the dirt track petered out. From there we would head into the bush and return to the community on foot by nightfall.

As we set off from the settlement, a third member joined our party. It was Skid, the black mongrel who had adopted the *gadia* as his family. He must have sensed an adventure was afoot, because he jumped up and plunked himself down in the back of the Land Cruiser without hesitation. I looked at Andumeri to gauge his reaction and noticed the faintest of smiles across his face. I took this to mean "no problem". Even though Skid was an obedient dog, I wondered if he would be a hindrance if Andumeri was stalking prey. We headed out of the community past the airstrip into a part of the country I'd never set foot in. Given that Oombulgurri occupied more than 12,000 square kilometres, that could be said of most of it. I wondered how many non-Aboriginals, if any, had ventured here.

As soon as the Land Cruiser sped off in a cloud of dust, Andumeri stripped off his shirt and pants and rolled them into a bundle. For a moment I wondered if he expected me to do the same, but he said nothing. I would have burnt to a crisp had I gone naked. For him it was a perfectly natural thing to do. Apart from dispensing with what he didn't need — and probably never liked wearing — his action seemed to be a symbolic gesture as well. It was as though he was shedding all that represented a modern Western lifestyle and was embarking

on a journey back into the ancient past, in which his people wandered this vast sandstone plateau, hunting, gathering, and acting as guardians of the land and everything within it. He handed me his rifle and clothes while he picked up a handful of spears and led the way into the bush, his chocolate-brown skin glistening in the morning sun. Skid tagged along behind to bring up the rear.

I followed Andumeri as if my life depended on it, and it did. Had I ventured out here alone, I would easily have become lost. After we ascended the jump-up — the winding edge of the vast plateau thrust up from the Forrest River flood plain eons ago — we were confronted with an endless landscape of small, gnarly trees and tufts of hummock and tussock grass asserting themselves proudly among rocky outcrops. The Pentecost sandstone was so old that layers appeared to be peeling off it. I tried to pinpoint landmarks to make a mental map of the route we were taking, but after about an hour playing this game, the utter repetitiveness of the landscape overwhelmed me, and I gave up. I prayed that Andumeri would not have an accident and that I might have to return to the community alone. Never before had I felt that my fate was so utterly tied to one other human being.

As we walked Andumeri barely spoke a word. He seemed to know exactly where he was going and what he was looking for. Occasionally, he'd stop and stoop down to take a closer look at animal tracks, then resume his trek. I tried to follow his example but struggled to identify any footprints. Apart from an occasional bird, I saw no signs of animal life all morning and began to wonder whether bringing spears and a rifle had been in vain. Just as I was pondering this, Andumeri motioned to me to take a break. He laid down his spears and fossicked around in the bush, returning with several spindly sticks and a bunch of dry grass. Taking out a knife, he sliced one of the sticks in half and carved out a hollow notch in the middle. He placed the other stick into the notch at right angles to it and began twirling it up and down. Within minutes, a small cloud of smoke wafted up from between the sticks. Reaching for the grass, he placed it near the smoke and within seconds it caught alight. I'd just had my first lesson in bushcraft.

But why had Andumeri chosen to light a fire here and now, I wondered. When I asked him, he turned toward me and said, "Fire good for country. Plenty grass and plants after fire. Long time, no fire." And then, as if an afterthought, he added, "Might be we gettem wallaby, too." As the fire picked up strength, Andumeri tore a branch off a tree and thrust it into the flames. Using this as his firestick, he indicated it was time to move on. With his spears in one hand and the firestick in the other, he walked ahead, every few metres dipping the branch into the grass and leaving a blazing trail behind us. Since there was no wind, there seemed little chance of being caught in a raging fire. Clearly, Andumeri had planned it so the fire would be behind us as we continued on our way.

The sun had moved from being overhead and was beginning its slow trajectory towards the western horizon as we began our descent to what appeared to be a water course in the distance. I was feeling peckish, even though I'd being chewing on pieces of salted beef and had a bottle of water to quench my thirst. When I offered these to Andumeri, he politely refused. Either he had decided to fast this day or he had other plans to deal with hunger and thirst. But Skid wasn't quite so accommodating. As we walked down the slope into a valley, he quickened his pace and soon was leading us. I followed him and Andumeri came behind me, ambling along with his spears clutched in his right hand. I then spotted pandanus palms and paperbarks in the distance, so I guessed we were heading for a water hole.

Skid had already figured this out. With nothing to restrain him, he bounded along and soon disappeared. I glanced back to Andumeri, who was about twenty metres behind me. As I turned around, I heard a wild snapping sound that echoed back and forth from the red rock walls of the gorge that rose up precipitously from the pool of water. I ran down towards the

water's edge just as Skid reared back from it and barked. Then I noticed something that looked like a log floating in the water not far from the shore. I looked behind me and saw Andumeri quickening his pace as he headed my way. "Rifle," he said, as he threw down his spears on the sandy beach. I passed him the gun, and taking hold of Skid, moved back a few paces from the shoreline. Andumeri raised the gun to his shoulder, eyed the slowly moving object in the water, and fired.

For a few seconds, the creature splashed and flapped around in the water in violent twists and turns. I stared transfixed, realizing that I had just encountered my first crocodile after more than a year in Oombulgurri. Other co-workers had reported numerous sightings, usually big salties in the mangrove swamps along the Cambridge Gulf, on mudflats on the Forrest River, or around the Wyndham meatworks. But I had not been so lucky.

Teresa Lingafelter

Skid and I share a reflective moment.

It seemed that Andumeri had wounded the animal but hadn't killed it. He waited until it had exhausted itself and floated belly up, then he waded out into the water. When he reached the crocodile, he grabbed its tail and started pulling it back to shore. As he did so, the crocodile flailed from side to side. Andumeri almost lost his grip but kept moving shorewards with the crocodile under his arm. As he stepped onto the sand I jumped back and Skid barked loudly. Once Andumeri was on the beach, he let go of the crocodile and it slumped to the ground. He then lit a fire as he'd done earlier, while I gathered dry branches and leaves from the surrounding area to add to the fire. Andumeri kept stoking the fire before letting it settle into a mass of glowing coals. When he determined it was hot enough, he bent down, picked up the crocodile, and threw it onto the fire.

As soon as its scaly body touched the hot coals, the animal flipped itself out of the fire and back onto the sand. It was as though it had been just feigning death. Andumeri remained motionless, assessing the situation. He then fetched a clump of reeds and used them to tie up the crocodile's snout. The creature protested but clearly it was losing the battle. Once again, Andumeri grabbed the crocodile by the tail, dragged it back to the fire, and threw it on. I was sure this would do the trick.

I was gobsmacked as the crocodile once again tried to hurl itself off the fire onto the sand. This time even Andumeri seemed a little perturbed. He fossicked around and found a heavy branch from a nearby tree. Lifting it high above his head, he brought it down with a thud on the crocodile's skull, once, twice, three times. When he was satisfied there was no more life left in the animal, he picked up the carcass and tossed it back onto the fire. There was a flicker of movement, but it quickly faded.

"Come," said Andumeri. "We go catchem fish while im cook."

Part of me cringed at the ugly death the animal had just endured; another part of me marvelled at Andumeri's courage and skill in shooting and handling it.

Our fishing expedition proved to be of short duration. He grabbed a line from his shirt pocket and wandered along the beach. When he hadn't had a bite after about twenty minutes, he asked me to hold the line while he went and checked on the crocodile. Ten minutes later he returned to announce "im done". I found this hard to believe, but I knew that Aboriginal people would often call something done if its skin or coat was singed.

I returned to the fire and waited to see what Andumeri would do next. He took his knife from his rolled-up pants and with one swift movement slit open the crocodile's belly. Blood and innards lurched out and dribbled over into the fire. Andumeri cupped his hands and dipped them into the stomach cavity, withdrawing them slowly to drink the blood they contained. He did this several times before turning to me and asking, "You like?" I nodded sideways in a polite thank-you-but-no-thank-you. He continued to wolf down handfuls of blood then he took his knife and cut out pieces of white flesh, which he devoured with relish. He turned to me and passed me a sizable chunk. I broke off a small piece, took a deep breath, and swallowed it. It tasted like raw chicken, but mushier. I accepted another piece but when Andumeri offered me a third, I passed on it.

John Burbidge

Andumeri cooking the crocodile on hot coals

All this time, Skid was pacing up and down the beach, wondering what to make of this strange ritual. When I offered him a piece of flesh, he sniffed at it and turned away. He finally plopped down beside me and we both watched Andumeri delight in his feast. When he'd had his fill, he stood up, walked over to the shore, and broke off another bunch of reeds. When he returned to the fire, he pulled the crocodile off and bound up its gaping belly with the reeds.

"You take em," said Andumeri, pointing with his nose to bundle of spears and rifle lying on the sand.

I scampered to my feet and collected the weapons as I watched Andumeri pick up the crocodile and place it carefully on his head, its snout leaning down one side and its tail the other.

As we walked away from the beach, I glanced up into the sky and figured we had about two hours of daylight left and at least four or five kilometres to go to the settlement. With Andumeri leading the way, we left the coolness of the pool and headed down the ravine into open country. Every now and then he would stop, reposition the crocodile, then resume walking. It must have been quite a load to have resting on his head, but not once did Andumeri so much as utter a sigh.

The sun had already set when we spotted the community in the far distance. A few lights flickered here and there and smoke from campfires drifted up among the trees. Andumeri stopped, lowered the crocodile, and put on his clothes. No sooner had we reached the outskirts of the settlement than hordes of young children came racing to greet us.

"Ali, ali!" they shouted when they spotted the crocodile arched over Andumeri's striding figure.

News of the catch spread throughout the community within minutes. Andumeri was pestered with questions as made his way down the avenue of boabs, his trophy proudly displayed for all to see. It had been a while since anyone in Oombulgurri had caught a crocodile, even a freshwater one like this. Conversations overflowed with the story that night until the embers of dying fires lost their incandescent glow. As was customary when a the

cattlemen brought home a "killer" or a family had a large haul of barramundi, the crocodile was shared among many. Next morning, a line of children formed outside the clinic and Sister Betty reported an abnormally high number of cases of diarrhea.

As I reflected on our day in the bush, I was so grateful to Andumeri for inviting me into his world, one fast fading from contemporary life and whose values and wisdom were in danger of being lost forever. I realized how privileged I had been to catch even this brief glimpse of it. But spending the day with him had another benefit that I wouldn't realize until years later. As we walked back to the community, memories of former times were sparked in Andumeri and one of those he shared with me. He didn't tell me the whole story, nor did he tell me the vital part he played in it. But he gave me enough clues so that on a visit to Perth I went to the state library and tracked down their one copy of the book, *Flight to Hell,* that opened a whole new window in my life.

Written by Hans Bertram, the book tells how he, as pilot, and his mechanic, Adolf Klausmann, made a forced landing on the remote Oombulgurri coast in a Junkers seaplane in 1932. With a combination of faith, will and amazing luck, they survived more than forty days before they were rescued by Aboriginal men from Drysdale River (Kalumburu) and Forrest River (Oombulgurri) Missions. These men kept the two Germans alive for nearly a week until the overland police party arrived. Once the police reached the rescue site, they immediately sent a message to Wyndham, the nearest town, to send a boat to fetch the emaciated men and get them to hospital. Having no radios or telephones, they used Aboriginal runners. Two were sent from the point of rescue via Forrest River Mission to Wyndham, a distance of about 250 kilometres. That night, Klausmann had a mental breakdown, so the commanding officer decided to send two more runners to request that a straightjacket be included in the rescue boat. He made it clear that he wanted them to catch up with the first two who had a day's start on them. One of those secondary runners was Andumeri.

Given this challenging assignment, Andumeri and his companion, Jalnga, set out and reached Forrest River almost the same time as the first two men. The outward journey from the mission to the coast that had taken six days they had completed in two. Jalgna afterwards commented, "Me no stop at all, no sleep. Travel longfella time. Me catchem Ernest awright." After just a brief rest, a cup of tea and some damper, Andumeri carried on alone to Wyndham, a journey that involved crossing two crocodile-infested rivers. He reached the town in early hours of the following morning and delivered the precious scrap of paper he'd been given to the police officer in charge. The next day the story of this epic search and rescue operation was front-page news in Australian papers and was reported in *The New York Times*. There was no mention of Andumeri and only a cursory reference to "Aboriginals" being involved in this incredible rescue.

I didn't know the full extent of this story until more than fifteen years later when I started researching it as part of an assignment for a creative writing course. As the pieces began to fall into place and clues led me down different trails, my admiration and respect for Andumeri intensified. At the same time, I was also drawn to Hans Bertram, the German pilot. After surviving the ordeal, he went on to become a celebrity in Germany and around the world — not just as a pilot, but a filmmaker as well. The two men were such compelling personalities, but in totally different ways. I spent a morning with Bertram in his office at the old Munich airport in 1992. He elaborated on the crash and rescue, gave me numerous photographs, and told me the mixed reception he received from the Nazi high command when her returned to a very different Germany than the one he had left in 1932. Three months after our interview, Bertram died at nearly 87.

Andumeri and Bertram came from such divergent worlds, were reared on such extraordinarily different value systems, and lived such contrasting lifestyles that there is virtually no way they would have ever encountered each other. But history deemed otherwise, and their lives were forever intertwined. That I should have had the privilege of knowing each of them, even briefly, was even more staggering. If Andumeri hadn't invited me to go bush with him that day, I almost certainly would have been denied this privilege.

Note: After many unsuccessful attempts to find a publisher for the story of the rescue of the German aviators and the role Andumeri played in it, I finally found a home for it in *The West Australian* newspaper, Big Weekend Feature, Saturday, 15th January 1994. This was my tribute to both men.

Heroic dash saves aviators

Faith and will drove airman to final destination