



PORTA POTTI

Travels with a Porta Potty

By Anthony Aikman

From the start I want it clearly understood that my travelling companion and closet queen was none other than the Porta Potti 265. This no ordinary old fashioned bucket elsan with turds and toilet paper slopping up to the brim. The 265 was, at that important stage in my life, the Queen of the Closets. Apart from a lid and liftable loo seat there was a refillable reservoir for flushing plus a small pump to do it. A sliding trap door to separate the respectable upper chamber from the unmentionable lower, a dial that went from green to red registering it was time to empty - when the violet and violent crystals (that just a sniff of would destroy one's nostril hairs) could devour no more shit.

Most important for a traveller was the 265's light plastic design and the fact that it unclipped into two equal halves that fitted into a zip-up 'holdall' bag easily slung from one shoulder, while a similar bag containing the other necessities of life, hung from the other.

Since that sunny day when I first purchased the 265 from a caravan and camping park in Southern England, (now declared an environmentally hazardous zone and ringed with razor wire and skull and crossbones signs) - since the start of what I may say became an intimate relationship between us the 265 and I have travelled to many far and distant lands, and although I defy anyone else to criticise her I must admit that I hope when the inventor got around to producing the 365 or the 475 he might have managed to overcome some of the minor hiccups of his earlier model. My criticisms usually followed those moments when an untimely escape of inner vapours turned one's hair green and shaved off the eyebrows. I often wondered about the inventor. Who he was. Where he came from. What inspired him to turn his hand to making portable plastic closet queens? I wonder if he might not have been a redundant scientist put out to grass when research ended on biological or chemical warfare - if it ever did? I used to consider this possibility whenever the little scale moved to the danger red zone and separating the two halves I had to carry the loaded lower container to some place where it was safe to empty it. The only truly safe spot would be about ten miles away from the nearest habitation and with a strong wind blowing out to sea. In such a location, provided I could hold my breath long enough to back out of range, the only fatalities would be any fisherman unfortunate enough to be within the line of fire. Yes, emptying my closet queen taught me two invaluable traits. 1. Never to trip when carrying a heavy load 2. To hold my breath long enough to swim underwater a hundred yards, to shin up any tall tree with my mouth closed, and to sprint half a mile without even thinking of tasting air. If the wind changed direction, the effects of the noxious fumes were spectacular. The vegetation instantly acquired a blasted, shrivelled, yellowish hue, and entire villages evacuated and ran amok convinced the end of the world was upon them. As for pregnant mothers, I fear the deformities of unborn infants would continue for generations.

Please understand this isn't criticism simply plain fact. All intimate relationships have their shaky, getting-to-know-you-periods. It's mutual respect that counts in the end. And I not only admired the faultless purity of the design of the 265 when using her, I learn to fear and respect her when it came to the monthly emptying.

And there was another problem. If a minor one. Whenever I travelled on aircraft. The Queen and I were parted. When I tried to get her in as cabin baggage the check-in counter gave me a puzzled look, before politely refusing. As if to say 'don't you think our on-board toilets are adequate?'. Once when at journeys end the Queen failed to turn up on the baggage carousel and I had to fill in the missing item forms, the official eyed me archly adding 'Do you usually travel with your lavatory, sir?' I mumbled something about being a missionary which brought a knowing nod, and had me wondering what unlikely items other missionaries had given as missing. I may say the Queen turned up a few days later quite unharmed. She seemed by the label to have made a detour to Genoa instead of Jakarta.

A lot of things in life happen by chance but an equal lot happen by need. I wouldn't have joined the communist party when I was a starving student in Venice if Da Pio's restaurant hadn't offered a 30% discount for party members. I wouldn't have become a missionary if I hadn't borrowed a clerical shirt and collar to don on arrival at Manila airport and protect me being mugged or shot by the sinister Manila taxi drivers. Instead of being eyed up and down as a potential victim the drivers begged me to bless them, photos of their wives and numerous children, and even the taxi itself, opening the bonnet so I could genuflect over the smoking engine. And it was need that drove me on my quest for the Porta Potti. An incident in Africa when I sat on the tin loo and suddenly felt claws nipping my testicles. With a leap and a howl I exited the lean-to loo performing a curious dance with my trousers around my ankles and my knees wide apart to the scorn of my neighbouring white parishioners and the hysterical delight of the black ones. Hoping that by leaping up and down I might persuade the scorpion to drop off before plunging its deadly hypodermic barb into my dangling bollocks.

This incident left me with permanent misgivings whenever I was obliged to squat, crouch, squat over any hole not guaranteed totally free of undesirable inhabitants. Instead of a relaxing moment to consider the next sermon all I could think of was what spiders, snakes, scorpions, cockroaches, frogs or centipedes might be lurking within striking reach of my vulnerable and unprotected under quarters. It's all very well to say, 'Put your hand down to cover them. But on a sit down loo that's a difficult squeeze and with a squat, especially a South East Asia model which is raised six inches above the surrounding slime. Even with both hands outstretched clutching anything for support balance is hard enough. With only one, impossible. Within split seconds the topple effect begins.

Then there is the flushing or generally the not flushing leaving you indignantly trying to swirl down the recalcitrant culprits with whatever water is available, using whatever utensil is available. If it's a Thomas Crapper model you may remove the cistern top if this isn't at ceiling level, only to discover the ballcock is missing, or the valve broken, or the plunger has long since given up plunging.

So now perhaps you begin to understand the support, confidence, indeed may I say joy, the 265 may bestow in remote places of this planet. Nothing can catch you unawares, nothing that is unless you pull the trap before lowering the lid and pressing the flush. In that unadvised event like an angry genii release from its bottle the 'black breath' will swirl up to gag you. So remember to take one very deep breath when you've finished your business and are preparing to exit.

In sheer admiration of 265 I have often been inspired to extoll its virtues, and have considered a rendition on style of the famous prayer, except some may consider this blasphemous.

"Our Porta Potty 365, Queen of Closets be thy name. Our evacuation done, Thy flushing come in Upper Chamber as in Lower. Give us each day our daily crap, and lead us not into other loos unless to forgive them their defects and deliver us from haemorrhoids for piles and piles, Loo End."

There are many less than sacred versions of the Our Father, and growing up in London I was impressed by the Bus Conductors tribute. Our Father which art in Hendon, Hammersmith be thy Name. Thy Willesden be done, Thy Kingston come, In Erith as it is in Hackney Etc Etc Etc.....Crouch End.

My first journey with the Porta Potty was to Segada, an Anglican enclave in the Cordillera Mountains of Luzon in the Philippines. The local tribe of Igorots (not Idiots) had given up their custom of eating missionaries alive after Father Staunton arrived. He didn't offend culture and custom by troubling the locals with doctrine but declared instead 'If you want to be a Christian clean your teeth and speak English!' So here is this remote place with its stone church straight out of the Cotswolds with all these Igorots packed inside wearing little else but loin cloths singing lustily 'Onward Christian Soldiers' in perfect English and with perfectly shining teeth, even if the front two are knocked out as a sign of beauty or manliness.

I travelled up to Benawe famous for its rice terraces-on a crowded bus in company with a Canadian missionary called Bob. Bob was headed for the Ifugau tribe who rumour claimed, hadn't entirely abandoned their traditional eating habits. But he was undaunted. This was his first posting. He carried a considerable amount of luggage. Solar panels to give him electricity and hot water, enough medicine for an entire hospital, sheets of corrugated tin. Ah, but the one thing he hadn't thought of-guess? That's it. And didn't he look crestfallen when I showed him the Queen.

"Wow," was all he could mutter. This was partly because we were at a roadside halt enjoying or rather bewildered by the hard boiled eggs we had just bought. Balot, they were called. What is inside comes as a surprise. Not the expected hard yolk, but a little hairy, just about to hatch chicklet. And the smell! Even the inventor of the 265 would have been hard put to analyse it.

Fortunately someone who was watching us spoke English. "You just cross your eyes and swallow!" he advised. " Hey what?" yelled Bob performing strange bobbing movements, " What did you say?"

Bob was determined to translate the gospels into Ifugao. He had already studied the language and it appeared there was one major difficulty. In Ifugau there were no less than thirteen words for rice but not one word for love. Perhaps that was his undoing, or did his future parishioners take one look at his well fed body and decide ' Dinner has arrived!' I never saw him again but the Ifugao had the decency to send his head home. As to the rest of him it's anyone's guessed. Still, as an elderly Melanesian bishop once informed me in the Solomon Islands. "My dear boy, of course we were

all cannibals when I was young," adding with just the hint of a wink," If you ever get the chance try the fingers, they're delicious."

Now if he had been accompanied by the 265 things might have been very different. When I arrived in Segada and reverentially unpacked my closet queen, it was immediately assumed to have sacred qualities and became an object of grave reverence as if it was the Queen of Heaven herself.

But I am getting ahead of my story. I left Brother Bob at a particularly desolate and deforested part of the road and watched him vanish into the terraced abyss followed by a team of porters hauling his gear. I peeped over the side. Far far below the jigsaw patina of flooded rice terraces glittered like shattered pieces of shining mirror. It reminded me of Tennyson's Lady of Shalot. (a poem I always admired and was annoyed whenever my sister's girlfriends burst out laughing at the line "the curse is come upon me" cried..... Now here, despite the picture postcard beauty of the scene I shuddered with premonition as if conscious of being in the presence of some curse. When later in Segada the police jeep arrived with Brother Bob's head wrapped in a sack I wondered if his soul was flying high above the forlorn peaks like the distant swooping eagles.

The day he left the jeepney I reached Benawe and spent the night in a rather primitive guest house where the porta potti came in useful as there didn't seem any lean too, and I refused to join the locals in a communal squat.

At 4 am huddled in blankets against the bitter cold passenger's sipped hot sweet coffee from a roadside stall and waited for the jeepney to get started. It was still deep night and the sky ablaze with stars.

About six hours later we completed a perilous descent to the Chiko River and waited for another jeepney to take us up to Segada. There was not much to eat. Or rather there was, but whether it was eatable was debatable. Before my departure an old missionary hand said of Philippine food, "There are plenty of Thai, Indian, Indonesian etc restaurants in London, but have you ever heard of a Philippine restaurant?" And I hadn't, and now I knew why. I can't see unhatched duck eggs going down well as an appetizer, though I suppose translated into French they might sound quite 'exotique'.

Segada was only 18 miles away but as the journey took nearly three hours it says something for the state of the road, the nearly vertical ascent, and the jeepney engine which was soon billowing plumes of steam like a kettle. We also blew three tyres.

Getting a puncture fixed in the Phillipines is interesting to watch the first few times as it gives one a chance to unload and stretch your legs, but after several performances it gets boring.

Jeepney tyres seem to be born without any tread whatsoever and the tubes are so covered with patches there's little of the original left. What is curious is that blow-outs always seem to occur a hundred yards before or after a repair shop. Is it just my

nasty suspicious mind or could the owner encourage business by spraying a few tacks about.

First the tyre is slowly levered off with crowbars and the much patched tube revealed, blow up, dipped in a bath, dried, paraffin slopped into a sort of vertical vice where a blazing pistol head is screwed down to weld a new piece of tube onto the old. I always wonder why the entire tube doesn't melt, but it doesn't, and eventually the wheel is reassembled, the jeepney unjacked and we're off to the next repair shop.

We reached Segada just as the church bell was tolling for evensong. Father Paul, the Phillippino priest came out of the village store swigging from a half bottle of 'gin', waved to me, nearly fell over, recovered and weaved his way up the path towards the porch. I suppose he made it. Apparently often he failed and took the wrong path and preached the entire service to an audience of pine trees or the dead incumbents in the church cemetery. (Once in a slurred voice he beseeched us to pray for 'all the dedicated ordinans in the cemetery'- but as mine was the only peal of laughter, I don't think anyone else noticed the gaff. Or perhaps it wasn't a gaff, and the place was strewn with dead half eaten ordinans of an earlier era?)

I carefully unloaded my precious 265, and was led to St Joseph's hostel managed by Anglican phillipino nuns where a room had been kept for me.

For once the Porta Potty had no immediate use. St Joseph's was adequately provided with clean squat loos. As a result, spotless and shining it occupied a corner of my small room with its fine view over the terraced valley and the pine clad mountains. I draped a small altar cloth over the closet queen and used it as repository for bible, cross, candles and saw nothing wrong with this secondary function when I got down on my knees before it each morning and evening and offered my prayers and concerns to my Creator. But I soon realised that the worthy nuns who cleaned the rooms regarded the P.P.265 otherwise. Unable to discern any other function they considered it, with all its tubes and scales and chambers as a modern replica of the Ark of the Covenant in which resided the spirit of the Creator. As a child I admired our wind -up gramophone particularly because I was in awe of the tiny person I was convinced dwelled inside and sang all the songs that came out of the speaker. I noticed that soon after my arrival fresh flowers and small pictures of saints appeared on the P.P. Finally even Father Paul took me aside and questioned me. "Is it true," he inquired, "You have this holy receptacle in you possession?"

Father Paul, when sober and when not, has this rather long winded style of speech. He came to my room. (I could hardly refuse him) and examined my temporary altar. "Mm," he murmured reflectively. "It rather reminds me of something but I can't exactly remember what."

I hastily (and bizarrely) hurried out an explanation. "It's something from Africa," I told him. "Symbolic. Africans like symbolism and a touch of magic. The two chambers. Yes, well they represent heaven and hell. This little trap door separates them. "Father Paul made the mistake of pulling the trap. "Ooof!" he shot back, eyes watering. "Hell certainly stinks," he cried.

"Ah," I responded, hastily pushing in the trap, "That's just the point. "It's no use being wishy-washy about hell!"

Father Paul who was standing at a safe (so he thought) distance, eyed the 265 critically. "So what's black nozzle for." (He was referring to the black swivel nozzle to fill up the reservoir.) I managed to shrug as if it was self evident. "Why the release of the Holy Spirit." "Like a genii out of a bottle!" He cried enthusiastically, completely won round. "Now I get it. Yes, wonderful." He eyed me more sombrely. "I think you underestimate the magical powers of symbolism. I think this sacred object should have a wider audience. That little side chapel where I take confessions." It was also where Father Paul received brown paper bags containing half bottles of gin in return for absolutions. But I was powerless to intervene. The same day the P.P. 265 was installed in its new home, next to the confessional. I also learned something of Father Paul's wilier nature when on surreptitiously checking it a few days later I discovered two half bottles of gin stored in the top chamber tagged with names of senders. Plus an empty bottle the contents of which had no doubt inspired the confessor. I discreetly replaced the ornate alter cloth shrouding the entire receptacle.

It was only a matter of time before miracles were attributed to the Queen of Closets. A mere touch cured warts, moles, unwanted body hair, and half an hour in the presence of the P.P. was guaranteed to get rid of unwanted pregnancies. People who had been rendered paralysed literally jumped if they dipped their head over the opened lid and the trap was momentarily opened.

One of the chief beneficiaries to what was rapidly becoming a shrine, was Father Paul, as the gifts of the gratefully cured came mostly in a liquid and bottled form. The other beneficiaries were the local souvenir makers who had been having a hard time until now thinking up anything very original. For as the fame of the Queen of Closets Shrine spread pilgrims came from far afield, and naturally wanted to take back with them a memento. Copies of the 265 were produced in all sizes and those specially blessed with holy water sprinkled by Father Paul came with a card and a special price tag.

My very real concern as the date for my departure drew near was whether Father Paul could ever be persuaded to part with it. I even began to fear for my safety. The old burial tradition among Igorots was for the deceased to be wrapped up and left in a cave or ledge among the limestone cliffs. I didn't want to find myself unceremonially following the demise of headstrong and now headless Brother Bob. For there was little official law in Segada. As Father Paul proudly stated, "The Spanish never defeated us, nor did the Americans and neither shall any self-styled president from Manila."

Segada was crawling with under-employed soldiers from the N.P.A (the National Peoples Army), who were supposed to be hiding in the extensive underground caverns nearby but seemed to spend most of their time drinking gin with Father Paul in the vicarage. Escape, laden with the precious P.P. would be impossible since Father Paul had stationed an armed guard outside the shrine. But as is often the case solutions are often quite simple. There was one old souvenir maker who loathed Father Paul and it didn't take much convincing to persuade him to create a perfectly resembling copy of the original in exchange for an absolute absolution for all sins past, present and future, in return of course for a vow of total secrecy. We arranged the swap of a day when I was taking confessions. The man arrived with the copy and the excuse of asking for it to be blessed. It was only a matter of moments to sprinkle a few violet crystals in the receptacle before he left with the original which remained gathering dust outside his shop until the day of my departure when I obligingly handed the sham 265 to an ever grateful Father Paul and hopped on a

jeepney with a sack containing my faithful friend. (No, not Brother Bob's head which had already joined other unfortunates in the seminary-I mean cemetery!)

Felix Arabia was the Roman desertion of Yemen. Felix meaning happy and not Felix the cartoon cat. On arrival I was greeted by men in long skirts and women so totally veiled in black you couldn't decide which way they were facing, and donkeys with transport number plates tied to their tails. Missionaries aren't welcome in staunchly muslim Yemen. Although like spies where they aren't supposed to exist they always thrive in a variety of disguises. The American Southern Baptists ran a number of hospitals but apart from them Europeans you had already decided were road engineers or businessmen suddenly revealed their true natures at the Sunday celebrations held within the safety of the American embassy compound. I use the word celebrations for that is what they appeared to be, everyone raising their arms in 'hallelujahs' and speaking in 'tongues', something I found rather disconcerting especially when someone who was usually quite sane and orderly burst out into a babble of 'mumbo jumbo', accompanied by all the symptoms of an insane fit. After a couple of visits I restricted my modus vivendi to the saner confines of the British embassy where the thirteen so called 'cultural attaches' or spies, formed the congregation and his Excellency the ambassador established priorities by declaring, "There's quite enough religion going on outside so have a gin and tonic." He was right too. Yemen was overflowing with religion but very dry on gin. I focussed my attentions on being a gin and tonic chaplain.

San'a was an unusually city in those days before electricity and roads. The mud brick houses that soared sky high for many stories were decorated in white plaster tatoos. And the windows of many coloured glass glowed from within at night like kaleidoscopes. My house was set apart in a patch of wasteland. It was where they put 'infidels' out of harms way, but once it became known that another specimen had moved in the entire neighbourhood came to squat and shit each night along my perimeter wall. If only the Prophet had insisted on squatting even just to pee, but he did and as the use of lavatories is not on the agenda of ritualist observances in the holy book, citizens were rather casual about location when it came to defecation. Of course one could understand that unlike the slaughter of animals when the victim had to be pointed towards Mecca before having its throat slit, it would have been a blasphemy to point one's bums in one particular direction unless downwind, but why did they all have to be pointed at me? I tried a notice in Arabic saying 'Don't Shit Here', but to no effect. I experimented with subtler methods. Noting that no one seemed to wear anything beneath their male skirts I cut a lot of prickly pears and thorns and distributed them liberally around my walls but all I got for my efforts was a punctured tyre. Next I tried quicklime figuring that a low level squat might result in a scorched undercarriage but this didn't deter the shitters either. Finally the Queen came to the rescue. One of those precious little sachets of violet crystals, innocent enough to look at, rather pretty like bluebells when sprinkled in a fine line along my boundary but just waiting for a decent turd to get to work on. That same evening the usual four score of eager crappers arrived to make their oblations but within seconds pandemonium broke loose. Groans, sneezes, aghast cries, figures wildly clutching smarting eyes, streaming noses, flapping skirts. Howls of rage and horror faded into the distance. I admit wearing an old World War 11 gas mask to read the scriptures was slightly inconvenient but well worth the effort. What fascinated me even more now than the absence of shitting fanatical devotees were the goats. The goats actually and unbelievably gobbled up the violet crystals and didn't drop dead, leap sky high, or glow with some inner luminous phosphorescence. I became quite fond of the goats until I forgot to secure the gate and discovered them eating my jeep. No wonder there was no garbage disposal in Sana'a, there were the goats instead.