

Victory in the Pacific

A Captain's Journal of the Ned Flanders XI Tour of Vanuatu in May 2006 By Matt Young

I suppose every Australian boy grows up with delusions of grandeur. The quest to play cricket for his country is never far from the fore thoughts of any Aussie kid who has held a cricket bat.

And I suppose that while only a precious few have the DNA, the persistence and the opportunity to be rewarded with a baggy green cap, it doesn't necessarily mean that only these elite blokes can tour overseas and play cricket.

The fantasy has always burned bright in me, that the mighty Ned Flanders XI should embrace a bigger stage than the Queensland Churches cricket competition. I always felt that the team deserved a moment on the world stage.

Just as the Japanese had seen the merit in ruling the entire Asia- Pacific region in the 1940's, I thought the Flanders should start their quest for world supremacy in our local Pacific area.

While I received favourable answers from Fiji, Cook Islands, Samoa and Tonga, the response I got from Mark Stafford, who is the president of the Vanuatu Cricket Association was the most impressive. He welcomed the idea of the Flanders quest for Pacific dominance and was a happy conspirator in organising the tour. Pierre Chilia is Mark's right hand man and was also a huge support for our touring aspirations. We decided to complete our local cricket commitments over the 2005-06 summer and after finishing 2nd in the A grade two day comp and a slightly disappointing 3rd in the one day competition, we decided that May would be a great time to tour Vanuatu. They would be in the thick of their season and we would still be in reasonable form after a few weeks break from our hectic agenda.

As a warm up for the Vanuatu tour we played in the Queensland Corporate 8's. We were aiming to defend the title we had won last year. We ended up finishing with the 3rd place medal after a tight loss to the eventual winners in the semi finals. Last year's "super 8's" had discovered the batting genius of big bad Brett Whalley and this year the 8's kicked started Roly O'Regan's batting resurgence. Roly played a match winning hand in our bronze medal game and gleaned plenty of confidence from his innings.

So I felt that the boys were in reasonable form and good spirits heading into the inaugural Ned Flanders International tour. Of course the team morale was brimming as usual. There is always plenty of banter and humour. In a club of about 16 players there are 16 clowns. All good humoured stuff though and I am proud to know that even though the humour can ride perilously close to being malicious slander, that when ever there is a crisis in a team mates life, his club mates always gather to the fray.

It is this loyalty to mates that is the greatest asset the Flanders team has.

The preamble to the tour was a huge source of fun for everyone in the club. There was fund raising to organise and plenty of Flanders paraphernalia to arrange. We had raffle nights up at the local Muddy Farmer Hotel. On a number of nights a few of the boys would sell tickets for a bottle of rum and the big prize was a cricket bat signed by the Queensland Bulls. The funniest moment came when an old mate called Oscar handed over \$50 for some tickets in the bat raffle and when I asked him how much change he wanted, he said he didn't want any. In fact he pulled out another \$50 note and ended up with \$100 worth of tickets. I have to admit I felt guilty when poor old Oscar didn't win the bat when it was drawn a few weeks later. But Oscar, rest assured you are often immortalised in legend and myth when the boys get together for a drink. The eventual winner of the bat was Roly's dad, Rob O'Regan and wasn't he delighted with his prize.

The other revenue raising pursuits revolved around finding sponsors that might be eager to jump on board the Flanders juggernaut. Plenty of the boys approached various companies- often associated with family members and we came up with about \$3000 in cash, plenty of sunscreen and a few shirts and hats.

My grandad always said it was very important to look like a cricketer when you took your place on the paddock. So bearing this in mind and of course combining it with the natural vanity of a few of the lads, we would be needing to be kitted out in plenty of high class clobber.

Brett and Emma Whalley lined up the embroidery and hence we ended up with an awesome Ned Flanders insignia on our white shirts- these were for the two 50 over International matches and a great pair of touring shirts for the lesser games and for our supporters.

Besides the great support of our sponsors, it really made me very proud that ten supporters came along to cheer the boys on. Roe Dog brought his wife, Kristen and his daughter Giselle, as well his mum and Kristen's mum to help out with the baby sitting duties. Kristen's friend Kelly made her first ever overseas trip just to see the Flanders action. The Roey contingent were aptly christened the 'Roe Pack'. Freya came along and so did Mum and Coll, so I was proud that my family came to help provide an audience. Taryn came along to support Stevie D and of course Emma Whalley was a tremendous presence.

The itinerary that Pierre from the VCA put forward was a bit daunting. That fact that I love to talk the Flanders up is a two edge sword. Of course it is very gratifying when people believe the stories that I spin that

generally may give the impression that we a trifle better than what we really are. Unfortunately, Pierre seemed to have been a bit misled because when he presented a proposed match schedule for us, it included an opening game against the Vanuatu under 19 team, two games against Invitation XI's and then to my horror two 50 over games against the Vanuatu National XI. While I love to think of the Neddies as being heavy weights in the Queensland Churches cricket comp, I wasn't really sure that we were ready for international cricket. I suppose I could have come clean and suggested to Pierre that he had us out of our depth. But when I put it to the boys we all agreed that this could be our one and only chance to be pseudo international cricketers, so why not keep living the fantasy. And so I agreed to Pierre's matches.

Of course heading into the cricket trip of a life time with several class clowns, the first day of the trip was never going to be a place for the faint hearted and certainly not for the gullible. Enter one Michael James Menagh. Poor Mickey had never been out of the comfort of Australia. So we all felt that a certain initiation was entirely appropriate to welcome him into the ranks of the international travellers.

I have to admit that it was my idea that Mickey probably wouldn't know too much about Vanuatu entry visas and that maybe we could stitch him up a bit at emigration at the airport.

So as the 24 happy Flanders faces met up at the Brisbane International Airport, there was mischief afoot. Adam Frankel, or Franky as he better known had made up some very authentic looking Vanuatu Entry Visas, complete with their National flag and coat of arms. There were facts about the duration of one's stay and about the purpose of one's visit. It was signed off by a bloke with a distinctly Pacific island name with lots of F's and lots of apostrophes and maybe even a few hyphens. So as the 24 Flanders queued up at emigration, I made the call for the team to pull out their passports, their exit cards and the you beaut Franky edition Vanuatu Visas. Tragically only 23 visas had been printed and only 23 people had received one. I even gave Mick a special word to get his visa out. Well then it started. The Mick Menagh show was in full swing. There was swearing and cursing. His pockets were turned out and his bags were emptied. There was Menagh stuff all over the Customs Area floor. There was blood pressure going up and every pore was sweating. And during all this debacle the poor kid couldn't have a durry to settle his nerves.

A few of the fellow travellers were tipped off to cast an eye on the entertainment and it was only when Mum got involved that I was forced to call off the proceedings. So it had begun. This caper really set the scene for all sorts of great shenanigans for the rest of the week. A few minutes later a young bloke came up with the hero worship glint in his eye and asked me if I was Matt Young, captain of the legendary Ned Flanders XI. Of course I had expected plenty of adulation and hero worship to be part of our tour and it was with a tinge of disappointment that I looked up to see a whole collection of Flanders clowns pointing and laughing. They had geed this bloke up to lead me on a bit. So the captain and one of the two vice captains had been 'got' and we hadn't even got on the plane.

The maroon and white touring shirts really did make us look like pros. Especially, as we were pulling our flash new cricket kit bags along behind us. I fancied that maybe I really was the Australian Cricket captain setting off with his team to reclaim the Ashes or the Frank Worrell trophy from distant shores with the weight of the Australian sporting public's expectations on his shoulders.

Not all of the Australian public seemed to be enamoured by the Neddies. As we queued at the check in area, we were assembled just to the side of the queue, expecting that all 24 of us might be led through the group check in section. One fairly obese woman who had been given a fearful hiding with the ugly stick took exception to us. She brazenly accused us of queue jumping and had the temerity to point to the back of the line and suggest that we ought familiarise ourselves with it. I explained that the odds were that everyone in the queue would most likely arrive in Vanuatu together. She then stated that she wasn't going to Vanuatu and she was only here to see her friends off. I suggested that perhaps she indeed ought be getting on the plane because it seemed to me that she was desperately in need of a holiday. She accused me of being rude and I accurately diagnosed her as being obnoxious and told her so. Later in the queue, Roly was having trouble finding his passport and as she observed his search she proclaimed that "people like that never go anywhere in life". Not such a profound reflection considering the bloke is a Chief Prosecutor and has just returned from Mt Everest base camp.

So the Neddies were making new friends already.

So, onto the plane with little pockets of Flandersmen all over place. There was a small Flanders enclave near the wings with such trouble makers as Roly and Tommy keeping company with Mickey. Franky was busy scheming up the front and I was down the back with Ginger and Mum and Coll. The Roe Pack was down the back. Roey even won a trivial pursuit question about sharks and octopuses and that was a symbolic start to the winning culture that was to ear mark our campaign.

Harry started up the drinking early and really put in the hard yards. For all the talk about Mickey setting a Brisbane to Port Vila drinking record, the young man curbed his thirst. Maybe he was still travelling a bit gingerly after the visa business. Sneaky Pete was sneaking in a few sly drinks. Chico was sorting out what sort of Julio beads he was going to adorn himself with and Chook was being easily misled by his fellow Julios.

Of course there were Neddies swanning all over the plane as if we owned the jet. At one stage there was an announcement that Virgin Pacific would like to formally wish the Ned Flanders XI luck on their upcoming International Cricket Tour. And further more there was a late message that had come through from the

Australian Embassy in Port Vila to say that Michael James Menagh's entry visa had been fast tracked and he would be granted entry into the country upon our flight's arrival. There was much rejoicing.

At the outset of the tour the 14 players had been divided into two teams. Two teams within the team. There was the Julios, led by that very pretty boy, Chico. Blokes that wore product in their hair, that wore skin tight shirts and blokes that had anything pink stashed away in their wardrobe were granted admission into this small vile club. There was Sneaky Pete, who already had a skin tight shirt on and Chook who had crossed over to the 'pink' side when I had had great Nerd hopes for him. Tommy Dover, chiselled from granite and just a bit too tanned and fit to be anything like a nerd and of course Franky with his penchant for ridiculously coloured shirts both got Julio jerseys. Bruce, by association with Tommy and besides he looked much too fit was also a Julio. Stevie D was also made a Julio- what with being a young up and coming physio and all that Giadarnos clobber that he wears. To recognise his dashing fashion sense, Chico was made their leader and Chook, to reward his senior role in the club, was installed as Julio's Vice Captain.

The far more down to earth and likeable Nerds were ably led by Big Bad Brett Whalley. A man destined never to wear pink, never wear Julio beads and never to use any sort of poofter product in his hair. Roles was his VC. A controversial choice in view of his flair for fashion and impeccable grooming during work hours, but I thought any one that can drink like Roles deserves to be a Nerd. Besides he is a lawyer and has more degrees than a right angle, so he fits the studious image. Menagh was obviously a Nerd and of course so was Roey. Roey was already busy working out various Nerd stats and averages.

Mark was a Nerd seeing as though he was doing a Ph D in physics- no further explanation required. By virtue of his drinking prowess, Harry scored an invite to the Nerds team and he happily accepted. Having no fashion sense and certainly no personal grooming at all, I was made a very proud Nerd.

So there were the teams. The two teams would be set in combat at all sorts of events during the tour. We thought our strong points were Mickey's drinking talents and our staunch working class, blokey value systems. Of course the Julios just thought they deserved to be the favourites for every contest by virtue of their flashy, superficial appearances. As the tour evolved however, substance would always triumph over style. It's a metaphor for life really.

So after about two hours the Virgin flight started heading down, much like the tone of the Flanders conversations and soon we hit the ground in Port Vila. I congratulated Mickey on his first international experience and we ambled off the plane. Dozens of locals were in the gallery, frantically waving and yelling their hellos. Of course we presumed it was all for us. The balmy weather was a prelude to what we'd experience over the next week. As we lobbed into the airport, a typical Vanuatu band was playing several welcoming songs for us all. It was our first experience of the locals and was a great introduction to this beautiful race of people. We were never made to feel anything but 100% welcome the entire time we were in Vanuatu.

We cleared customs and stocked up on duty free grog and claimed our cricket kit bags. Kristen Roe had lined up a bus transfer to our hotel and after a brief drive through the leafy, lush outskirts of Port Vila we were soon driving up the drive way of the Melanesian Hotel. Our sanctuary from the pressures of International cricket for the next ten days.

Kristen in her role as Ned Flanders official travel consultant had done a remarkable job in arranging all our plane tickets, our transfers, our insurance and our accommodation. She had worked tirelessly for the team and looked after us all with the best of prices. She really was a star.

The staff welcomed us with a lovely tropical beverage and soon we'd dropped off our kits and were gathering in dribs and drabs around the pool and sorting out beverages. Harry was still going strong and was very eager to sample the local 'Tusker' beer.

It was a poignant moment when we all sat there relaxed at the pool. Years of fantasising and a year of planning and cajoling, fund raising and encouraging people to get on the band wagon had reached fruition. Now all we had to do was have a ball and play a bit of cricket.

My next job was to sort out the playing personnel for our five games. We had 14 players and so everyone would play three or four games as it stood at the initial stage. I ran the teams and selection policies past the two tour vice captains, Stevie D and Mickey and also past the senior man, Brett. They were all happy that we had teams that were both competitive and more importantly gave everyone a fair go. Every bloke on tour deserved a chance to play against the Vanuatu National team and of course I also had to consider that it was quite a tough and hectic playing requirement to play five matches in just six days. Also, blokes that had brought family along would of course be keen to spend time with them and the beauty of the country meant that everyone would be interested in getting out and exploring what this lovely tropical land could offer.

The first night was deemed an official Flanders function. We lined up dinner at the local Gino's Pizza place at the end of the Hotel's driveway. I wanted to have an official welcome dinner at the start of the tour, to welcome both the playing squad and the ten supporters. Being an official Flanders function, the team mascot, 'Shithead' the chicken had to be brought along. As the youngest member of the team, Franky had the honour of caring for Shithead from the start. A responsibility the young man cherished. So 24 of the tour party, plus Shithead paraded down to the restaurant for dinner. Along with Stevie D and Mickey, I presented each player with his official playing shirt and of course the much treasured Baggy Maroon cap, inscribed with 'Ned Flanders XI, Vanuatu Tour, 2006'.

Everyone was wearing their Flanders paraphernalia and the mood was buoyant and full of fun. It was a lovely night and I must say I was a very proud Neddy that night. I was proud that 14 blokes had shared the dream and the adventure and even the challenge of embarking on a cricket tour. And I was proud that so many family and friends had also seen the potential of the trip. I found myself being quite awestruck that a tiny Churches cricket club could have evolved into an international touring team and even more awestruck by the unbelievable camaraderie and the deep friendships that permeate the team. All these positive attributes diffuse far beyond just the players. The Flanders spirit and bonding has infected so many families and friends. The Flanders is such a positive institution and that positively transcends cricket. There are so many great adventures that so many of the team share off the paddock as well.

My great mate Pierre had lined up a mate of his called Lolo to be our driver for the week. So to start off our tour Lolo took us out on the Sunday. We circumnavigated the island of Efate- of which Port Vila is the main city. Part of the trip was a lovely stop over for lunch at Eton's Beach. All the fanciful ideas I had had about tropical island beaches came true at Eton's Beach. The water was pristine and warm. The waves crashed right to left and the sand was perfect white. The coconut trees waved gently in the breeze and a few coconuts bobbed in the shallows. Franky set himself to open up a coconut with his bare hands but after almost breaking his hand decided the lessons of stone age man were well learnt and he smashed it open with a rock. There was something Biblical about him going around with the broken pieces and offering a bit to everyone. Especially in view of his flowing beard. The only difference to the Last Supper was that there aren't any betrayers in the Flanders- just saints.

Mum and Coll enjoyed a stroll along the beach and just the special view. We also stopped a bit earlier at a fishing spot and it was a treat to watch the locals with their fishing gear. What a lifestyle they have. It's all about family and friends and the essential things of life. And all this is set in an idyllic setting of perfect beaches, gorgeous sunshine and the gentle Pacific Ocean. No wonder everyone smiles all the time over there.

So back to Eton's Beach. The two skippers of the Julios and the Nerds had decided that this was to be the site of the first challenge. We were to play footy in the water, in waist high water. Of course with the man mountain himself, Brett, we Nerds thought we were the odds on favourites. But never underestimate the unscrupulous nature of the Julio. Roe Dog was busy with his offspring and Harry was still comatosed at the Hotel after his record breaking effort with the Tuskers. So we were down two key men. The Julios didn't care a bit. They have no honour and they opportunistically took on the mighty Nerds with a two man advantage. After mixing it for the first few minutes and being level at two tries all, the brave Nerds fell and the Julios took a 1-0 lead in the series. Brett was an inspiration as skipper. Like a gallant bull elephant he took some heavy punishment from the hyena like Julios. They set upon the great man like a rabid pack.

So our picnic lunch was a trifle tarnished by events of the first Nerds versus Julios contest, but even that couldn't detract from the magnificent setting. I am still trying to work out why I should live in Moorooka and not there at Eton's Beach.

The driving tour took us past plenty of coconut plantations- mostly owned by ex pat Aussies and Kiwis. We also stopped in at some villages and got a feel for their way of life. There are lots of humble homes and lots of smiling kids. Pigs and chooks and plenty of well fed dogs grace the villages. No one seems to be rushing and stressed. Just a whole stack of sitting around yarning. It's a bit of an inspiration really.

The kids are all cute as buttons and love to smile and wave at us. A couple of kids took great delight in diving off a bridge into a river, just to show off a bit.

Those beautiful smiles and those incredible white teeth really are post card pictures.

So then we headed into a hilly area and stopped in at the next 'Survivor' set which is set to be filmed soon. We saw plenty of road side stalls selling a delicious selection of tropical fruit from paw paws to bananas and other exotic looking things. There were shops that pedalled old coke bottles from the Americans who had been based here during the War. What an odd industry.

On our final run back into Port Vila we stopped for a photo spot on high point looking back down onto Port Vila. It gave a lovely overview of the many little islands that make up Vanuatu. Some are quite sizeable and some are tiny.

I could see great areas of coral and lots of little boats and even a few big ones. Trawlers and dug outs alike. And of course the sun setting into the ocean really is very special.

The lush jungle dominates every island. Some are mountainous and some are flat. I could certainly get a feel for the volcanic nature of this area - the local tourist slogan is something along the lines of 'Vanuatu- Islands of Fire' and the view really did underline that.

Then there is the occasional pristine white beach lining snug little bays and harbours.

What a delight this place is.

Back home by just before sunset, a few of us headed down to the Port area to watch the sunset. It was so relaxing just sitting on the bay with the locals all smiling and saying 'hello'. The sun sinking slowly and the gentle sunshine warming my face. Ginge and I reclining on a park bench. Nothing to do and all day to do it. Nirvana, indeed.

Work seemed a million miles away.

Some of the Julios lashed out and bought bead necklaces at the local markets. A staggering display of vanity and self adornment. Brett was disgusted. These beads were christened 'Julio Beads' or more commonly 'poofter beads'.

The Melanesian Hotel put on a show tonight and there was lots of local dancing and drums. Percussion seems to be the local musical specialty and there was plenty of thumping tonight. There was a bit of a nosh up at the pool side BBQ and the food was great. We all had a lash at the kava ceremony. I reckon the kava was the special tourist edition. It tasted pretty average - like dish water and didn't seem to have much of an effect. The main talking point of the night was the dancing troupe's attire. They were all blokes and all had goudes over their penises but their scrotums were left out in the air. Good for their sperm count I suppose but the sight of a dozen black scrotums was quite a culture shock to the Flanders party.

Most of the boys had a fairly early night with our first game being the next day.

We were set to play the Vanuatu under 19 team the next day. Being our first game of International cricket, the trepidation and the excitement was an exhilarating blend of emotions.

I went to bed feeling like I did as a kid on a Friday night before a big game. I had all sorts of thoughts of playing shots and taking catches and the glory if we managed to win.

I never really had much idea about the standard of cricket over here. It really was a mystery. All I hoped was that we'd be competitive and maybe a few blokes might score a few runs and we'd take the odd wicket. I really hoped that each bloke would have some small playing highlight as well as the cultural experience.

I thought about Bangladesh touring Australia and just competing with the best and maybe they glean their satisfaction from just being the best that they can be rather than from winning.

Maybe I'd score an international run or take an international catch. At the very least though, I was set to lead my club team against an international team and that's a memory that I knew I'd never lose.

So dreams of cricket gave way as the sunshine woke me up on Monday morning.

So here I was, about to embark on my international cricket career at the age of 39- way past my best as a batsman. Encumbered with the reflexes of a 39 year old and the arthritic legs of a 39 year old. I really didn't feel like I had too many natural assets to help me. But what I did have was 13 champion team mates. Team mates that were in this situation with me and I knew that every one of them was feeling excited and that they would do their club and themselves proud. All we can do is play our best cricket and play united as a team. We'll play with our usual passion and excitement. We can only control what we can control.

The mood at brekky was a bit pensive. There was certainly excitement about the match but also a few nerves. Most of the boys got into their Blue touring strip early. These shirts had a number and our nicknames emblazoned on the back. I am number '1' and have nickname of OC. I know the 'O' stands for 'old' but the 'C' is a bit of mystery to me.

Lolo picked us up. Harry just made it to the bus, having only just recovered from Saturday's excesses. Chook was late as per usual. Sneaky was chanting at the bit. He's been talking about facing the first ball of the tour for the last six months. Once we got on the bus, I felt infused with Flanders spirit and now it was the united strength of 14 blokes that would be doing battle with the young blokes from Vanuatu. Cricket after all was something we'd all been raised on. I knew our aggressive, hyped up ways on the field would probably be something new to them. Who knew maybe we had a chance.

We were set to play at Independence Park- the main sporting arena on Efate. It might have been the premier sports venue in Vanuatu but the fact that the ground was on a 10 degree slope running across the field was a tad disconcerting. It was certainly going to be a case of knowing which side of the field to hit the ball.

Throw in the strong breeze blowing down the hill, and I certainly knew which end of the wicket I'd play the pull shot from and from which end I'd play the cut.

I met up with Pierre who had escorted us out to the ground and met a few of the local players. I presented their captain Michael with a book about the history of Australian cricket. We presented all the opposing skippers a copy of this book during the tour.

I won the toss and thought bowling first would give us more of an idea about their talent and the style of cricket they played.

The locals were bolstered by Pierre and also an ex pat Aussie bloke called Tom Clements.

Harry had the honour of bowling the first ball in International cricket by a Flandersman. It was a good length ball just outside off stump that sailed through to the keeper. Stevie D opened up from the other end and also bowled a tight first over. The two openers bowled a phenomenal spell each, and when Stevie knocked Pierre's stumps all over the place to make it 1/25 in the 8th over, we were certainly on top.

Bruce and Mickey took up the challenge after Stevie D and Harry bowled out their allotted 6 over spells.

The number 3 was Andrew Masale and he had the big wraps on him. He was clearly the best batsman in Vanuatu and together with his captain, Michael started to push things along for the hosts.

Michael and Andrew were clearly our major threat and we started leaking a few 4s and 6s. Both were very strong front foot drivers and quite a few balls started disappearing across the road. It took some Chico magic to claim the next wicket. Chico hurtled around from his position at long on to intercept the ball just short of the boundary at long off. From a crumpled kneeling position he hurled the ball straight over the bails at the bowler's end to the ever alert Bruce, who took off the bails and that was the end of Michael. Never run two to Chico. Andrew then lost his composure and tried to hit Mickey back over his head and succeeded only in

skying the ball to point. Stevie D ran around from his new found keeping position to take catch and the Flanders were back in the game. 3/82 in the 20th over.

Andrew was certainly strong off the front foot but we felt we could contain him by getting the ball pitching just short of a length and keeping a tight line. Mickey bowled beautifully, obviously relishing his mantle as Co vice captain and the chance to travel overseas to play cricket.

Then in came Tom the ex pat Aussie who had played 1st grade cricket and trained with the Western Warriors. He certainly looked like he knew what he was doing.

He smote one ball from Brett some where into a bay near Fiji. Then another ball disappeared down the street and hit a passing mini bus. The driver started ranting and raving at Chook down on the boundary, until Pierre stepped in to calm down the threat of any tribal pay back machete activity.

The dent in the car was certainly impressive.

Brett came back superbly to have the last laugh when Bruce took a smart catch off Tom on the fence at long off. Tom's score of 45 was to prove pivotal. Meanwhile Brett cleaned up another fella's stumps on his way to a two wicket haul and the best figures of the day. Chico saw us through at the death from the other end and claimed his first tour wicket when Sneaky took a neat catch at square leg.

So Vanuatu under 19's made 6 for 152 off their 30 overs. I suppose at 3/83 at 20 overs I felt we were well on top and that they got away a little bit at the death.

All six bowlers had bowled well and the passion and desperation in the field was superb. It made me proud to wear the baggy maroon.

Chook took a fantastic catch at deep mid wicket. Running around to his right and claiming the ball over his right shoulder only to find that he was a couple of metres over the boundary.

The ground fielding was tremendous despite the uneven ground and the 10 degree slope. No one gave up even when we started getting some tap at the end. The talk on the paddock was sensational. Everyone was inspired by the big stage we were playing on and wanted to do something special for his club and his team mates.

We had a full squad at the ground and all ten supporters and I know all the boys really valued their encouragement.

About 50 locals packed into the stands and cheered our boys on. Harry or Sticky as his shirt suggested was a big crowd favourite and he received plenty of cheers from the local fans.

A couple of tough catches had gone down but that had nothing to do with lack of effort.

So 153 to win off 30 overs. Very 'do-able' if we all fired with bat.

Franky courageously volunteered to open the batting with the senior man, Sneaky Pete. Pete was a very focussed and determined man as he strode out to face the music.

Pete, as he had dreamed of, faced the first ball and scored the first run and even hit the first 4 in Flanders International history.

All the team were with the two boys in the middle.

After looking solid in defence, Franky snicked a big drive through to the cordon and we'd lost our first wicket.

The young bloke was just shattered by his duck, but full credit to him, he bounced back brilliantly in the later games. By virtue of his duck, Franky managed to hold on to 'Shithead' for at least another 24 hours. The two of them were obviously beginning to forge a very close bond. Team management had decided that the honour of taking care of Shithead should go to any player that dropped a catch or scored naught. Taking care of Shithead consisted of ensuring his presence at all official Flanders functions.

Chico came in and made a big splash straight away. Here he was as a young 22 year old, facing his first ball in a match against an International side and he effortlessly plonks it over backward square leg for six. He certainly loves the big moments. Chico and Pete played very adroitly and added 46 before Pete managed to pull an awful ball straight to square leg and was out for a very fine 26.

2 for 53 at the end of 14 overs was a solid base from which to launch an assault on victory.

Stevie D went in next and hit a lovely boundary before holing out and then Chook did similarly. I came out to bat at 4 for 65 in the 17th over and joined Chico, who by this stage was looking like a match winner. I thought if I could push a few ones and twos and put the young gun on strike to pick up the bigger shots, we'd be a chance.

I must admit I was a trifle nervous facing my first ball but that sailed down outside my leg stump and then a few balls later, I pushed one behind point to score my first International run. As with all the boys' first runs, the crowd gave me a big cheer and I must say I was very excited to look up into the crowd and nod to Coll, Mum and Ginge, as well as my team mates.

Slowly the runs came - the ones and the twos. We found that we could confidently take on most of their fielders with aggressive running between the wickets. It was always going to be hard to swoop on the ball and throw the stumps down on the uneven outfield. Chico put a few to the boundary and another one over it and together I felt we were beginning to get the locals a bit panicky. But then Tom put one through Chico's defence to clean up his stumps and the game was back to being even. Chico's 47 runs were a grand return and he thoroughly deserved a half century.

Big Bad B Whal came out to join me and the young locals seemed a bit intimidated by the giant. Especially when he smacked a couple of balls to the far flung points of the field.

Again the pendulum swung back to the Neddies. Andrew was the best bowler today. He bowled loopy off spinners and he had a knack of putting them on the spot every time. None of us has faced too many quality offies and so we all stayed fairly anchored to our creases and hence allowed Andrew to dictate to us a bit too much.

Brett and I saw him out and then Brett unleashed a huge hit off Michael and we were on top as the ball bounced down towards the main street of Port Vila.

But credit to Michael, the young skipper. He cleaned up Brett's stumps and off Brett traipsed with a sterling 17 runs. Then poor old Mickey went down swinging to leave Roly to see out a hat trick ball. Four overs left and 34 needed. Tom knocked over my middle stump with my score on 20, as I tried to put him over mid wicket and we were left with Roly and Harry in partnership. With two overs to go we needed 22 more. Roly then almost pulled off something remarkable. In the last over, he tonked one over mid wicket for four and another one over mid on for six, before being caught on the very edge of the boundary looking for six more. Harry was run out in the meantime and the Flanders were all out in the final over just 13 runs short.

So we had run a phenomenal race and come up heartbreakingly short of a historic first International win. All the boys had played tremendous cricket and we had nothing left in the tank. I was so proud of the way the fellas had played. Another great chapter had been written in the glorious annals of Neddies history.

So we gave three cheers for Vanuatu and three more for Ravi the umpire. Then back onto Lolo's bus we climbed. The poor old supporters had to walk home. Luckily it was only a ten minute walk back to our hotel. We had a bit of a warm down in the pool. The mood was a bit complicated. We had done ourselves proud but still lost. I think everyone saw that we could certainly mix it with the locals and that the International matches were going to be a bit harder as the young guns of their under 19 team would be blended with a few more senior blokes.

I felt that perhaps our best chance to register an International win had slipped away by a lousy 13 runs. I also felt that if I had been able to just get another boundary or two away in the 28th or 29th overs we might have got home. There's so many 'maybes' in life.

Brett lined up what was to become an institution for the week, that is the post match press conference back in Ginger's and my room. I was decked out in my Flanders cap and shirt and the boys posed as reporters and fired all manner of probing and pointed questions at me. Brett filmed the whole deal and there were plenty of laughs to be had as the boys revelled in being able to put me on the spot.

A few post match drinks helped keep the mood jocular and helped ease the disappointment of losing a tight one.

We identified a few key lessons from today's game. Andrew was obviously their key batsman. We had to keep the ball short of a length and cramp him for room outside off stump. Tom was a good hitter and loved to pull the short ball. Being an ex pat Aussie, he played just like we all do and he loved the short ball.

We thought their fielding was suspect when the pressure was applied and that aggressive running between the wickets would reap rewards. Their bowling seemed to revolve around off spin and the old adage of patience and partnerships was reiterated. None of their bowlers had anything like extreme pace and their medium pacers all bowled at least one bad ball per over that could be punished.

We had to look at consolidating after the fall of a wicket. We had lost wickets in little clusters today and that had to stop. Some of our batsmen had looked like they were suffering a Super 8's hang over, with lots of crazy big shots played at the wrong times in their innings. Greg Chappell's motto of playing along the ground and in the arc between mid off and mid on until you reach 20 was sound advice for a lot of the top six bats. The next day was another beautiful day in Port Vila. We were to play an Invitation XI in a 20 over game. 20-20 cricket is not something that any of us had any experience. So the brains trust of the two vice captains and Brett, Roly, Chico, Roey and Chook and me as the captain, had a yarn about tactics and possible match winning scores.

We thought 120 would be competitive and otherwise we would approach the game in a similar way to the first game. Lots of aggressive running, good talk in the field and ruthless bowling changes if someone was getting some tap.

After missing the first game, Roe Dog, Tommy and young Mark came into the starting XI. Mark was especially keen and when I saw him at brekky he already had his shirt and cap on. I was excited that he was excited. Roey as always was oozing his peculiar lay back keenness and Tommy was chanting at the bit.

Today's game was at Kazza Park. A lovely little ground carved out of the jungle, with a lovely hill just beyond it. There was a little stand for the players and fans. The weather turned a bit misty and overcast, just as we were starting and I thought that would slow the outfield up a bit. As well as this, our lack of experience at 20-20 cricket seemed to make it a good option to bowl when I won my second straight toss. Today marked my 103rd game for the Neddies and Roey reminded me that it was my 100th as skipper. I hoped that the result would pan out similar to the epic win we'd had in my 100th game.

Pierre led the Invitation team today and he strode out to open. With the ball likely to skid a bit in the greasy conditions, I thought Roe Dog would be a surprise weapon, and so I threw him the new ball. In keeping with the legend of the Roe Dog, the young gun fired out Pierre's opening partner for a golden duck. 1 for 1 and the Flanders were away. Harry chipped in with his first wicket on tour by spreadeagling Pierre's woodwork and the mood was buoyant. Then yesterday's nemesis and a bloke called Richard combined to take the

game away from us. Richard made 49 and Andrew picked up a mighty 53. We were our own worst enemies. A couple of skiers went down and another three or four difficult catches were grassed. Catches that on their day, the fieldsmen involved would have snaffled very capably. Mickey bowled a bit short and was punished and Tommy bowled without luck, being the unlucky bowler for two of the easier catches. A few heads went down and there seemed to be a fair bit of 'not wanting to be here' going on. The ground fielding became ragged and the talk that was so prominent yesterday was muffled and muted.

After the big partnership was broken, we did fight back to a degree. Tommy took a superb catch out at long off to rid us of Andrew. He ran full pelt around the boundary, before sticking up a forlorn right hand and captured a tremendous outfield catch. That really lifted the spirits. Danger man Tom was out soon after as he drove one out to me at deep extra cover and I ran in, dived and picked up a handy catch in the outfield. It was the only catch that was offered to me on the whole tour, so I admit I was pretty stoked that it stuck, especially seeing as how Mum, Coll and Ginge were all at the ground.

Brett picked up a caught and bowled and Stevie D knocked over another one and so they ended up at 7 for 152 off 20 overs. The same score to chase as yesterday, but with ten less overs to get them. The only real positive was the way the later middle order seemed to crumble under pressure and that was a forerunner of things to come in later games.

Chook opened up and played a reasonable off drive to the first ball of the innings, only to be devastated to see the mid off run back, leap skywards and take a magnificent catch. The big man looked shattered as he slowly crept off the field. At least he had the consolation of Shithead's company until the next match. There was something strangely appropriate about the big Chook having the company of the smaller chicken.

Tommy was out for 10 soon after and that brought me out to join Stevie D. Stevie played with controlled aggression and again I felt that our running between wickets was rattling them. Ones and twos were building our momentum and Stevie was getting a few fours away. But when Stevie was caught off Andrew for a fine 34, the sting went out of the Flanders tail. Roey and I fell in the same over. Me for 18 and Roey for a solid 10. That took the stats man to 992 career runs for the Neddies. Brett had to slog and left for 7 and Roly swung lustily a la yesterday for another valuable knock of 15. At 7 for 115 we were shot but there were still some highlights to cheer. First Franky made up for yesterday's disappointment by not just scoring his first runs on international soil but also playing some majestic pull shots. He picked up a couple of 4s and one enormous six, that seemed to be mere gentle caress of the bat. Then the young gun came in, Mark. He'd played one game for us a few years ago and had not even batted. He was in the middle, on naught, ready to face the final over. We still needed over 30 odd to win, so it was really only about what he could do to create a little bit of personal glory. He creamed his first ball down the ground for two, to collect his first runs for the club. Then a wild slog was just a bit wayward and missed the ball and then came his champagne moment. The final ball. He charged down the wicket and hitting with the off spin, put the ball into orbit and well into the adjacent jungle for a huge six. He was only marginally more excited about it than the rest of us. What a moment. So things finished at 7 for 123. Another loss. This time by 29 runs. Yesterday's loss left me feeling proud but today was different. I felt we had let ourselves down in the field. When a 3rd catch went down in the space of about six balls, the opposition were laughing at us, and who could blame them. We were embarrassing ourselves and everything that our baggy maroon caps stood for. We were letting ourselves down and letting down our supporters who had travelled so far to cheer us on. The proud traditions that had gone before us at the club were being ridiculed. Great men like Overlack, Exelby and McDougall would be ashamed of what was going on.

I know Brett felt it hard too. He called it 'can kicking'. Too much sulking after stuffing up and not enough hardening of the resolve to do better next time.

So the ten minute drive back to the hotel was a solemn time. The older blokes decided we needed not just a press conference but also a team meeting to get the campaign back on track. We called a team meeting and both myself and Brett spoke about pride and what the tour was about. I don't mind losing as long as we have played with the famous Flanders pride and commitment. Not just commitment to winning but also to each other. Being proud of your performance and your contribution to the club. It came down to putting in when the chips were down and not just being a high flyer when the team was winning. It's about character and it's really a metaphor for life. We spoke about aiming to lift your individual performance after you've made a mistake, especially in the field. Putting down a catch is shattering for a bowler at the best of times but when a fielder lets the bowler down when an International wicket is at stake, the bowler is going to feel it just a bit more.

We spoke about putting a high price on your wicket as a batsman. We spoke about the basics of patience and partnerships while batting, and about putting in the hard yards when the team was in crisis.

Consolidation after a wicket was vital.

The mood was stern and I thought that was good. Everyone was hurting and a bit embarrassed by the performance. I reckon I knew that every bloke would be rearing to go and die for his team for our next match. I also thought it was a good thing that we had a day off the next day. It would be reasonable to keep our minds clear of cricket for a while and then come back even hungrier than before.

Outside of cricket things were taking a few interesting angles today as well. Sneaky Pete, Ginge, Franky and I went up to the General Hospital for a clinical visit today. Pierre took us up in the back of his ute. A lovely

lady called Doreen took us on a tour of the wards and the out patients departments. They have a surgeon who does about 40 operations each week. Then the big work load is seen at the obstetric ward. Sometimes they end up with 320 babies arriving each month. Only a tiny number need Caesar's and vacuum extractions. Nurses run the ENT and the Eye wards and a visiting specialist comes in once each month. He has a very busy day when he does come.

Sometimes teams from Sydney would come for ENT and Eye lists. The locals really valued these blokes' contributions.

There was a child health department that was about to embark on a massive project to vaccinate all the school kids for measles, mumps and rubella. The program was to take nurses out to the villages as well as the schools. It seemed like an enormous undertaking.

The physio department spent most of its time remobilising stroke victims and helping out the amputees. Legs were mostly lost to diabetes.

We met a girl called Nina from Melbourne who was doing a Ph D in PAP smears at the hospital. She said they have no PAP smear program in Vanuatu and so cancer of the cervix is quite common.

The antenatal Nurse explained that 1 in 20 antenatal patients has syphilis. That is an amazing figure considering, I've never seen a case.

They had a well kitted out library even if some of the books and journals did seem a bit outdated.

There was about a dozen doctors that staffed the place and about 70 nurses. The doctors were a blend of foreigners from Australia and Britain and also some local doctors trained at medical school in Fiji.

They all worked extremely hard and were obviously people of great dedication and altruism. It made all four of us proud to be part of the health care professions.

The other exciting news of the last day or two was that the Nerds had taken on the pretty boy Julios again and this time came away with the gold. We challenged them to a freestyle relay. You'd think the Julios would have put a lot more 'style' into their freestyle but they melted under pressure just like their product infested hair does in the sun. A proud day to be a Nerd. One all and the Nerds were back in business.

And didn't the Julios arc up about a variety of injustices.

Also on the extra curricular front, a few of the lads headed out to a local kava bar and got themselves fairly messy. The kava that we'd been offered on Sunday night was obviously the watered down edition but this stuff was the real McCoy and there were numb mouths, numb faces, spasticated legs and vomiting going on all over the place. A few soreheads surfaced the next morning, still ruing the local rocket juice.

Coll headed out with the fishing fans this morning too. Mickey caught a couple of biters but otherwise the pickings were slim and we had to buy dinner again tonight. Stevie distinguished himself by spewing over the side of the boat. The initial diagnosis of sea sickness was eventually thrown out as the rest of the team was gripped by an epidemic of gastro.

The two tinny loads of fishermen had a fun day despite the cramped conditions in the tiny craft. They went out just off one of the nearby islands with Lolo's mate. The anchor was especially entertaining, it being two besser blocks roped together.

Mum, Coll, Ginge and I were joined by Mark for dinner down at the Port Vila Yacht Club. The young bloke had just got word that he'd done quite brilliantly in the GAMSAT exam and had scored an interview with a huge chance to get into medical school. I was very excited for him. The Yacht Club was a lovely venue and the food was top shelf, especially the sea food as you'd expect with Efate being 'girt' by sea. It was a nice, quiet night and we all headed off to bed pretty early. Two games in two days had taken a bit of a toll on me mentally more than physically. I always find a lot of mental energy is dissipated in the shorter versions of the game.

The best feature of the Yacht Club was the famous (I suppose) bell ringing cat. Well we saw the cat and he was very cute with his black and white coat, but he didn't seem too interested in ringing the ship's bell that sat resplendently near the bar. Both Ginge and I, being cat people were quite enamoured by the pussy cat. So I went to bed tonight feeling relaxed about the prospect of a day off cricket and Mum, Coll, Ginge and I were booked to head over to Pele Island for a day trip on the Wednesday. It was going to be a real tropical island treat and I couldn't wait.

Wednesday morning was a trifle disappointing from a weather point of view. The clouds were rolling in and the threat of rain and drizzle was a constant problem. The tourist bus arrived early to collect the foursome for Pele Island and we spent the next 1 1/2 hours traipsing around the coastline of Efate. We saw plenty of villages and coconut palm plantations and of course plenty of smiling kids who loved to wave at us. We retraced some of the steps we'd taken with Lolo on Sunday. It wasn't long before we were loading up onto the two small boats that were designated for cruising us across the bay to Pele Island. Pele was a delight. The perfect white beaches and the gentle lapping waves were enchanting. There were some little thatched shelters for us to leave our bags and to set up our towels. From here we snuck out to the reefs and Ginge, Coll and I enjoyed the thrill of snorkelling around the coral and the excitement of meeting thousands of colourful fish. Star fish and sea cucumbers were added features. The fish were absolutely amazing. Iridescent blues and purples and yellows and oranges. There were red fish, blue fish and a multitude of other Dr Seuss favourites. Some were shy and some were quite daring and loved to check us out. The shapes and sizes were incredibly varied, too. We stayed for about an hour out there on the reef before we floated and

paddled our way back to shore. Mum and Coll took the option of a village tour and met some of the local people as well being introduced to the sea turtles that had been caught and tagged for research purposes. Ginge and I took the time to lay on the beach and relax, soaking up the occasional rays that the overcast day was offering. I worked on my tan and Ginge worked on a few more freckles.

The surrounding islands must have housed a million secrets of head hunters and cannibals and tribal wars. There were legends of great chiefs and harems and sacrifices that our guide Ron enthralled us with. It was a lark to lay there and recreate these images in my imagination.

I was entertained for ages by the busy scuttling lifestyles of the crabs. There were hermits and sand crabs all hurrying about evading waves and hunting for scraps of food.

The trip back across the bay was an adventure, with the breeze picking up and the waves chopping across the bow. We drove home and had a quite night and contemplated the next day's cricketing challenges.

I met up with a few of the other boys and was filled in about their day's excitement. About eight of the lads had been picked up by Pierre early that morning and taken up to Independence Park where 140 school kids were waiting for them. Chook was there and Chico- both sporting their blue cards. Brett was there to wave the Nerds flag. Franky and Roles had been looking forward to the chance to do some coaching. All the boys that travelled up to the clinic had an absolute ball. They were all impressed by the standards of talent and ability. With a bit of coaching and encouragement these kids could be anything in cricketing terms. Their fielding was full of the natural athleticism that you see in young West Indians. The kids all loved having the great white cricket gods show them a thing or two. Pierre introduced Brett to the assembled throng and the boys just loved retelling the story. Pierre was rattling along in his native tongue and the only words that anyone recognised were "Ned Flanders Whalley". This became a bit of a catch cry for Brett for the rest of the tour. All the fellas seemed to take delight in mumbling out a few words of pidgin English and then tacking "Ned Flanders Whalley" on the end of it.

I reckon the exercise of training up these school kids was a great piece of public relations and I know all the boys that partook in the action had an absolutely thrilling time. The general consensus was that the smiles on the kids' faces made for a memory that will go with the boys to their graves. The local press also covered the coaching clinic and gave the Flanders a generous write up. Roly was very excited to be quoted in print and a couple of snaps made their way into the local rag, too.

The next morning I woke up excited- just like I used to as a kid before cricket.

Today I was set to lead my club against an International cricket team. Sometimes dreams really do come true. Today's game was scheduled for Kazza Park. The starting XI was dictated by availability by and large. Tommy was laid low by gastro and Mickey was struggling. Stevie was fair at best, as was Chico. Harry was rearing to go. Chook was a bit seedy. The local Vanuatu Independent remarked that the Flanders had been struck down by 'Vila Belly'. Bruce's leg was slowly improving after he'd injured it in game one and been forced out of game two. He was rostered to sit this game out but valiantly came out and fielded for the entire innings. All 14 men came out to the ground in a great show of club fervour. It was a matter of all hands on deck to salvage the situation.

Mark Stafford was leading the Vanuatu XI and kindly gave me the option of batting first despite winning the toss himself. At the opening of the day, I don't know that we would have been able to field eleven blokes on the paddock.

So out they went, Franky, the new man at the top of the order, accompanied by the incumbent veteran, Sneaky Pete. Tommy was originally set to open but I felt it best to let him recover a bit more after a sleepless night thanks to the gastro.

Sneaky played superbly. Driving solidly and playing the pull shot brutally. As usual in defence he was impregnable. Franky was also very neat in defence and had a stupendous over in which he wrested the momentum in our favour. He hit Liam, their opening bowler out of the attack with a series of huge pull shots. One even went for six, while another couple scored four. That brought Andrew into the attack and he was his usual tight self. His loopy offies landing right on the money every time. The runs dried up a bit but the boys countered by some well run singles. It was one of these quick singles that led to the first wicket. The partnership was broken at 49 when Pete just failed to beat a throw home running for the 50th run. Chico went in and survived a chance early on, before asserting himself. The score cruised to 1 for 67 before Pierre came into the attack and changed the whole game. First he trapped Franky LBW and then Stevie was bowled second ball trying to pull. Then after accepting the generous applause of the Vanuatu boys for being the Flanders captain, I was trapped for only my second ever golden duck for the Flanders. Chico felt the ball had hit me outside the line but it didn't matter because I was gone LBW.

1 for 67 became 4 for 67 in just four balls from Pierre. It was an inspiring over from a man who clearly loves cricket and loves playing for his country.

So Chook came in facing all kinds of pressure and held up like a champion despite being sick as a dog. He and Chico righted the ship for a fair while. It was all a bit reminiscent of the great partnership they put together in my 100th game against Mustang Sallies. Tragically it was all truncated a bit too soon as Chook was bowled through the gate by a good off cutter. He was gone for 10. Chico, meantime was playing one of his best knocks. Roey has never let the team down and he seemed at his determined best today. He only needed eight more runs to bring up 1000 career runs for the Flanders. Just as he went out to bat, the whole

Roe Pack arrived and I know the man was proud to have his family present when he registered his special milestone. He is only the sixth man ever to do it.

Roey stuck fast and Chico started playing freely. Twice he smacked balls over the ropes as well as sprinkling in plenty of fours. I was very proud to be there to see him bring up the first half century of the tour for us. Not long after this, Roey tickled one from Tom and was caught at the wicket. 6 for 129 and the innings was in tatters. But the Flanders are never broken and Brett played a splendid knock of 14 in a valuable liaison with Chico. Chico played a tired shot on 74 to be caught at cover point. It was a fabulous innings and proved to be a match winning contribution. Roles was gone cheaply for the only time on tour and this brought together Tommy and the great M J Menagh. 9 for 173 after 42 overs was a dodgy place to be. Both of these warriors were stricken with the gastro and both looked awful. Even more awful than usual. Both had been vomiting freely and had had a few excursions to the bushes accompanied by some souvenir loo paper from the hotel. But courage is what it was about today and the two lads played brilliantly. Tommy controlled the strike early on and Mickey just kept getting in behind the line and keeping the ball out. They ran heaps of singles and gained their confidence and then as the overs ticked down they chanced their arms and hit a few twos and Tommy lofted a couple of lovely boundaries over the inner ring. As they strode off, wasted by the oppressive heat and the gastro, it reminded me of Dean Jones in Madras as he lost 7 kg of body weight on his way to 210 in the Tied Test.

They had added a vital 34 runs. 34 runs that proved to be so decisive in the end.

Mickey had had one of his finest hours as the vice captain. Especially when one considers that he had started the day in extremely average fashion. Poor old Mick had managed to catch the gastro that was circulating around the team. He asked me for a diarrhoea pill as we waited in the foyer for Lolo to take us to the game. In typically cavalier fashion, Mick declined a drink to wash the pill down, only to have the thing get stuck half way down. So there was Mick surrounded by his team mates, trying to catch the vomit as it cascaded out of his mouth. Poor Franky got collected by the shrapnel and luckily my kit bag just dodged a bullet. Mick made it out the front door and proceeded to provide a lovely little welcome for the day's visitors to the Melanesian. Needless to say pandemonium had broken out in the foyer amongst the boys. It was certainly remarkable that Mickey had managed to catch the majority of the vomit and some people even considered it to be his best ever catch for the Flanders.

Anyway, back to Mick's batting.

It was a knock dripping with desperation and pride in the baggy maroon. Tommy played with a huge amount of brains and equally as much guts as Mick. Their last wicket partnership really inspired the whole touring party and I know lifted them both even higher in the respect stakes within the team.

The psychological advantage of getting past 200 was certainly appreciated by the whole team. Also, nothing undermines a team's mental momentum like a pesky last wicket partnership- as the Flanders will gladly attest after the misery of last season's A Grade final when we were undone by the 112 run last wicket combination.

So while Mickey and Tommy lay almost unconscious in the shed, the other 12 in the team hyped ourselves up and focussed hard on the task ahead. The previous games had seen their tail enders and later middle order falter and 207 was a reasonable score to defend.

You never know in cricket.

It was disappointing to lose Tommy and Mick from the bowling line up but cometh the hour, cometh the man and it created an opportunity for the other boys to put their hands up and take on some extra responsibility. Mickey had bowled a great spell in game one and was in good form. Tommy's leggies were set to be a secret weapon against the locals. I had seen no leggies in any of the teams we'd played against and I wondered how they'd go against Tommy's toppies and leggies.

The new ball men, Harry and Stevie were pumped. Harry was his usual ball of aggression and bowled as quick as anyone I've seen play in Churches cricket. The pace certainly was a novelty to the local opening bats.

Early on the pace from Harry and Stevie, although very menacing for the batsmen, was actually a bit counter productive. Three catches went whistling into the slips region and all three went down. Brett did remarkably well to get a hand on two catches and saved 8 runs in doing so. The first break through came courtesy of Stevie trapping Richard Tatwin plumb in front for 16 and out strode Andrew Masale. He found life just as rough as the two openers had against a very fired up Harry and the ridiculously talented Stevie.

Chico replaced Stevie in the 11th over and soon enticed another snick from Andrew only to see the ball sneak through the fingers of Stevie at 1st slip. But not to be beaten, Stevie chased hard, turned on a six pence and hurled the ball back to 'keeper Roey, who had the bails off in a flash. Our huge appeal seemed to take forever to be answered but eventually the umpire agreed with us and Andrew had to go. He didn't seem too fussed on the decision and loitered for a while before heading off disconsolately.

The Flanders had a sniff. Trevor Langa opened the batting and after being kept in check and on the defensive, he started to increase his tempo. Early on, he played a missed a bit and had a few lucky escapes. His luckiest escape came while facing Harry. The big angry man smashed one through the defences and hit poor Trevor right in the box. Everyone on the field felt it as the poor little bloke bravely stayed on his feet. We didn't feel any better as he pulled his box out of his jocks to reveal a shattered plastic remnant. I reckoned it

was the best \$10 he ever spent. For all the aggro that Harry oozes, I must say I was very touched, when at the end of the day, he presented Trevor with his own box. It's little things like that that say something about a bloke and it certainly helped lift our esteem in Vanuatu cricket circles.

The next big decision I had to make was who was going to fill in the role of 5th bowler, after Mickey and Tommy had been so drained by their heroic batting they couldn't even stand up let alone bowl.

Roey was a prime candidate but he was needed to keep. After his handy spell on Tuesday, I decided to go with Daffy and what a bonus his spell turned out to be. After Andrew was 2nd out, Mark Stafford joined Trevor and proceeded to annoy us with a solid partnership of 33 before Daffy removed Mark thanks to a neat catch to the safe hands of Stevie at cover. The young bloke was so excited, but that was nothing like what I felt when he dispatched Trevor, with Franky doing the catching honours at point. Trevor had made a brilliant 63 and it was probably the pick of the innings played against us on tour.

That made it 4 for 122 in the end of the 25th over. They only needed 80 odd runs in 25 overs with plenty of wickets in the shed.

I reckoned at this stage that the game was never going to go to the 50th over and so I felt it was time to rest Daffy after a superb spell of medium pace bowling which yielded 5 overs, 2 for 20. The big gun had to come back and so I threw the ball to Harry and he fired right up. He'd still only taken one wicket on tour despite bowling absolutely brilliantly. Chico was tight as ever at the other end and all of a sudden there seemed to be a momentum swing towards us. There just seemed to be a few nerves floating around in the Vanuatu camp. The running became a bit scatty and the calls were a shemuzzle. The stroke play became extremely inhibited and the Flanders began to sense their trepidation and we tightened the screws.

Although Chico did not take a wicket he bowled a tremendous spell of 10 overs for just 41 runs. So Brett took over from Chico and bowled in tandem with a very pumped Harry. Even though things were being kept tight, it was wickets that we needed if we were to win. I was getting desperate as Harry started his 10th over. Even though he bowled brilliantly, as usual the luck eluded the big quick. But then fate took a hand and Harry skittled Ben Kingsbury and then with his final ball knocked out two of Liam Flanagan's stumps. 6 for 165 after 35. A betting man still would have put their money on Vanuatu. Despite still having still to find another 5 overs from the 5th bowler, I was confident that Brett and Stevie would either take the wickets or concede the runs before those 5 overs became an issue.

Stevie was as focussed as I've ever seen him and bowled if not his best, certainly his most memorable and most important spell for the Flanders. Brett just kept plodding in and landing the ball on the spot and with his subtle variations was making life extremely tough for the batsmen.

Just after Harry's 2 wicket over the momentum came surging back towards the Neddies. Tom Clements had put us to the sword in Monday's game and always looked good at the crease. I knew that he was going to be a giant stumbling block. He was set on 22 and was hitting the ball sweetly off the front foot. In Brett's 5th over he absolutely smashed one out of the screws and it was well on its way for 4 when Big Bad stuck out his big right mitt and popped the ball skywards and then remained perfectly calm to catch the rebound.

Advantage Flanders.

7 for 165 and the scoffing laughter that we'd heard on Tuesday emanating from camp Vanuatu, after we dropped a few catches was transformed into a pensive silence. The locals were under the pump and the Neddies were in control. The hype on the field was palpable and the talk was sensational. The pride in the baggy maroon was as strong as I've ever felt it. Destiny was upon us and there was no way any of our 11 was going to let this chance for greatness be stolen from us.

The 7th wicket fell in the 36th over but then Lenika Natapei and Pierre Chilia showed some grit and rode things out for 5 or 6 more overs. Stevie was into his 9th over and while Brett was set to bowl out his 10 over stint at one end, I was starting to have to think about who was going to bowl from Stevie's end when he finished. I need not have worried as Stevie decimated Pierre Chilia's stumps to make in 8 for 182. Brett chimed in again by bowling Lenika at 9 for 183. One more wicket needed and Stevie was about to start his final over. I remembered him taking the final wicket in a match at Kianawah Park four years ago to claim a victory that set us on the road to our first A grade Premiership and I wondered if the young buck could do it again. Patrick Haines was the luckless number 11 who was thrown into the pressure cooker. Stevie just seems to take the big moments in his stride. He charged in. There was some playing and missing and some groans as the ball whistled past the edge and the stumps and into Roey's gloves. Roey as usual was as safe as a bank behind he stumps. His keeping was one of the huge features of our match today. He has never let us down.

The pendulum and the psychological ascendancy were so strongly in our favour, I just couldn't see how we could be denied. And so it was, as Stevie charged in for the 4th ball of his final over. Patrick grimly tried to defend but his prodding jab at the ball missed and down went the stumps again.

All I remember is sprinting in from my position at cover, looking Stevie in the eye and laughing and then continuing on in a huge circle that took me past all the team mates and eventually out to near the boundary at deep mid wicket. I saw Bruce charging in from long on and patted him on the back and then headed over to the assembled throng of Neddies who were holding on to each other like we'd just been liberated from a death camp.

It was my favourite ever moment as a Neddy and I have to say my favourite lifetime moment. I have never felt that good. It tips my Med School graduation down to number two.

I remember jumping high onto Stevie and Brett's broad shoulders and yelling and screaming and laughing and beaming with pride.

Roly ran up to me and stuck the match ball in my hand and said something along the lines that I should have it as a souvenir. It will always remain one of my most cherished treasures.

After the game there was an assortment of vital photos to be taken. Every permutation of players in front of the score board and of course all the supporters needed to be immortalised on film. I had one with Mum and Coll and then with the whole team and then with the co-vice captains and just about everyone. Roly and I had a snap together, too. It was a bit reminiscent of our photo together at Mt Everest base camp. We gave three cheers for Vanuatu and three more for the umpires. Mark Stafford presented me with a Vanuatu National cricket cap and I will long cherish that as well. We presented a cricket shirt that Brett had procured from '3' to Trevor Langa as the Vanuatu man of the match. I had already given Mark a cricket book to mark the occasion of him captaining his country today. Harry made his special presentation to Trevor and I am sure the young bloke will long use Harry's box.

I gave a short and sincere speech and Mark said a few words on behalf of his team and we had a lovely photo done of both teams together.

Mum and Coll were absolutely stoked and proud and I just couldn't stop obsessing that my humble little Churches cricket side had just beaten a national team. It was great to be able to share such a life high light with Mum and Coll.

I was a bit sad that Ginge had missed the excitement. She was off doing her dive ticket but she was amazed at what the Neddies had achieved and very excited, proud and happy.

Even getting a duck could not undermine my jubilation and I was very pleased to accept the custody of Shithead until the next game.

That night the press conference was tremendous fun. The questions were a laugh a minute and the camaraderie was outstanding. This is the reason I play team sport. Sharing this match and these moments with the team are memories that will last forever. This one match will link all these fellas together for the rest of our lives. We will always have this awesome achievement in common. It helps define who each of us is and what a phenomenal bond it is to have between us. We all had a few beverages and a feed together and as I climbed into bed I just lay there reliving each moment of what had been the greatest day of my life. To make the tour happen and then to take on and defeat a national side was something that most people can only dream of but the Flanders had made it become a reality.

God I love my team.

Next day, was to be a rostered day off for Stevie, Brettie and me, but with the gastro still decimating our ranks, all three of us had to back up again. I had told Mickey that he would be captain for today's match at the start of the tour and he was so excited and proud, I couldn't very well deprive him of the honour.

After 70 odd matches and seven long and loyal years of service he deserved the special reward.

So for just the 4th time in my career with the Flanders, I was playing as a player and not as the captain.

We were set to play another Invitation XI in a 20-20 game. Again we were at Independence Park. After yesterday's heroic win I think we all felt today's game was a little bit of an anti climax. Mick won the toss and batted first. I was banished down to the number nine batting slot and Stevie pencilled in at seven. We both suggested it was some kind of covert operation by Mickey to undermine and usurp our positions as captain and co- vice captain.

Taking on the responsibility for Shithead, I set the little yellow chicken up in a great spot in the grandstand.

He sat proudly in the front row and had a special view of the proceedings and was pretty excited to be part of the usual Flanders banter.

I don't know what Sneaky Pete had for brekky but he came out firing. He played with a care free attitude that I had never seen him have. He played superbly off the front foot and caressed some lovely drives as well as his trade mark pull shots. He smote one glorious six and was the mainstay of our dig. He was eventually out, stumped, trying to smack Andrew Masale over mid on and into the bay area. He sacrificed a chance at 50 for the good of the team. He made 42.

Franky opened with him and hit two sweet pulls for 4 before being caught. Roey played diligently at number 3 for a well compiled 15. Roly just keeps getting better with the bat on this tour and he hit freely for a fine 18 to be 2nd top score.

Mick was run out for 3 and then we suffered a nasty little collapse with Chico (1), Stevie (2) and Daffy (0) all falling in 3 balls for a team hat trick of sorts. Bruce and I saw out the innings and took us to 8 for 123. 123 was not ever going to be quite enough on first glance but the Flanders never give up and when Mickey had the locals teetering at 2 for 6 at the end of the first over, it seemed the captain was set to bowl us to an unbelievable triumph.

He knocked over Andrew Masale and the locals were 3 for 34. Fenefy Masau was streaky early and offered a catch to Chico at 3rd man off Mickey in the early part of his innings but tragically it went down and he went on to play the innings of the day to score 50. Mickey's spell of 3 for 33 was a real testament to the young

fella's pride in the baggy maroon. He brought a nobility to the captaincy and was certainly our best bowler on the day.

Bruce bowled a very tight set of overs as opener and was desperately unlucky not to get his name in the score book with a wicket.

Harry was venomous again and Daffy again chipped in with a wicket and a tight spell.

Chico and Brett each took a wicket and the locals ended up just limping home with 8 for 125 late in the 19th over.

Fenefy was awarded our vote as the local player of the match and Brett again presented him with a '3' cricket shirt which the youngster really appreciated.

It was a fun day and we all enjoyed ourselves. I think we were all still basking in the glory of the day before and life was feeling pretty sensational.

The game was wrapped up by lunch time and a few of us were keen to watch the local rugby match that was scheduled to be played at Independence Park at about 4 pm. We all rocked up only to find that the game had been cancelled because of some 7's tournament that had been played the day before. Some locals offered to have us play with them in a touch game but after the strenuous week we'd all had and the ever present risk of tearing weary muscles, we declined.

Four games gone and just one big one to go the next day.

Most of the fellas had a quite one and were in bed pretty early. I was impressed by the attitude. We still had the second International game to go and the dream of a 2-0 series victory over the Vanuatu National side was a real possibility.

As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered if the drizzle that was threatening might just wash us out and hence we'd win the series 1-0. But then I thought about the thrill of another International Match to play in and I hoped the rain would stay away.

Next day the drizzle was still about. Ginge was away early with Taz to hook up with the Dive Team and today was to be their graduation day after an intensive three day dive course. I know both the girls were pretty thrilled and very excited.

Not long after brekky, I realised that my little yellow mate was missing. In fact I couldn't remember seeing him since yesterday's game at Independence Park. I felt racked with remorse and I was horrified that I may have to face the awful truth, that I, the captain had lost our favourite mascot. Luckily as Mark Stafford arrived, he presented me with Shithead and I must say it was a touching and heart felt reunion. What a relief! My guilt was somewhat tempered by my overwhelming sense that some of the boys probably had something to do with Shithead's disappearance. To purge my guilt, I happily took responsibility for Shithead for the rest of the tour.

Today's game was set down to be played at Hippique Park. This was the pick of the three venues we played at on tour. A lovely lagoon snaked past the field and an assembly of coconut palms swayed in unison around the perimeter of the ground. A very rustic stand was on hand for the teams and the supporters. A horse paddock complete with a collection of horses and chooks abutted the stand.

I won the toss yet again and batted. Patrick Haines was leading the Vanuatu team today and they seemed to have assembled the best team that we had faced. They looked alot more focussed today. I think our win in the first International had stung them a bit and their pride was hurting. I felt we'd be in for a very tough game today.

Patrick put his faith in Kennedy and Ben Kingsbury to open the bowling and our initial combatants were Sneaky Pete and Franky. Both our boys had been in good nick on tour and were keen to get amongst it today. A solid start was augmented by a few wides and the swinging ball was proving a trifle difficult to control for the quick bowlers.

Every thing seemed to be going well for us when all of a sudden Sneaky flashed at a wide ball and tickled it through to the keeper. 1 for 26. Pete was filthy at himself, having done the hard work and his form on tour had been so good that I think he had really set himself to peel off a big score today.

Franky was playing well and played some nice pulls which have become his trade mark shots on tour. Then out of the blue he connected sweetly with a hook shot but tragically the ball sailed high and long to the fine leg man who took an excellent overhead catch just in from the boundary.

Then the big wicket fell. Chico who had been our star batsman so far got a faint edge on one and was on his way for 14. I strode out to link forces with Stevie. We chatted about some of our previous partnerships and decided that the captain and the vice captain would turn the precarious situation around.

By this stage Patrick Haines was into the attack for Vanuatu and was bowling the best spell we had faced on tour. He had two of the three wickets and he was bowling at a lively pace and was moving the ball prodigiously off the seam. One brute of a ball reared up into Stevie's armpit and the next ball was a huge leg cutter that ripped past my outside edge. Stevie was trying to assert himself when, having despatched the previous ball over mid wicket for 4, playing a bit early on a pull shot and skied it to the keeper. It was 4 for 59 when Chook almost staggered out to join the battle. He was still a long way short of healthy after the gastro but the big man seemed to have a point to prove today. He loves the big stage and some of his best scores have been in rep games- something that occasionally makes me a bit jealous that rep teams reap all the benefit from Chooky's skill.

But today, in the heat and humidity and with all the pressure of a score of 4 for 59 and with the Vanuatu skipper, Patrick, really sticking it to us, the Chook stood even taller than usual.

We decided to consolidate for a while and see out Patrick and then see what we could do. Another wicket would hand ascendancy over to the locals.

Chook started hitting the ball sweetly and I wasn't going anywhere.

After my inglorious duck in the first International, I was determined that I would do something useful with the bat for my beloved Flanders XI.

I chipped away with ones and the twos and the Chook hit some sweet boundary shots. A few wides came as a bonus and as we walked off at drinks we had wrested away some of their advantage. The score was 4 for 122 after 33 overs. The Chook was looking a bit drained but was battling on bravely. We both sucked the fluids in at drinks and came up with the plan that we'd continue as we'd been doing until the 40th over and then Chook was to hit his straps. I would aim to bat through and the boys that came after would do their bit. Chook's energy reserves were nearly on empty but he was seeing the ball like a melon and started plonking the ball all over the paddock. The boundary fielders were no where near far enough back when the Chook middled the ball. We hit a couple of huge 6s and then brought up a thoroughly deserved half century. In the meantime the partnership had blossomed and we were just on the brink of a century partnership when the big man's energy gave in and he was caught for 52. The Flanders were back in the race at 5 for 155 in the 41st over. Chook had played one of his greatest innings again on the big stage. Cometh the hour, cometh the man.

Enter Tommy, and the running between wickets became frightening for me. The whippet ran like a demon before leaving for 5 and then Brett touched one through to the keeper and we were in a spot of bother again at 7 for 166. Roey came out with his customary grit and determination. I was out soon after trying to put Ben Kingsbury over mid wicket and lost my stumps in the process. I scored 34 and I was proud to have been part of the Neddies revival.

When I left in the 46th over we were still a bit short of a healthy score but Roey is always the man for a crisis and so it seems is that man Daffy. They turned dot balls into singles and ones into twos with some incredible and exhilarating running between the wickets. The fielders started getting flustered and a few overthrows started leaking. The bowlers lost their line and a few wides sprinkled onto the score sheet. Roey spanked a huge cover drive into the horse paddock and Daffy peeled off a couple of 4s and before we knew it the 200 had been posted and then they pushed us up to 8 for 208- 1 better than the previous International.

Roe Dog came off sweating hard with 19 not out and Daffy had an equally valuable contribution of 16 not out.

The two young bucks had put their stamp on the game.

For Vanuatu, Patrick Haines bowled magnificently for 4 for 34. He bowled some brutish deliveries and I could sense the pride he had for his side and his country.

Andrew Masale bowled his usual tight line and length to finish with 6 overs for 17 runs. Tom Clements bowled an express spell and gave me plenty of purple souvenirs on my body and legs. We all sensed that Patrick, Andrew and Tom had really lifted a cog or two since the first International. The fielding was athletic and composed for the most part until Roey and Daffy caused some mischief. The catching was sound and the keeping of Trevor was very steady and safe.

At lunch, I appealed to the boys to just lift one final time to get this final assignment squared away.

It had been a long and tiring tour but we still had one more peak to climb. We owed it to ourselves to come off the park in 50 overs time with absolutely nothing in the tank. Looking around the squad's faces, I knew that I didn't have to do much to fire this brave and dedicated band of brothers up.

We talked about doing it for each other and to enjoy ourselves. Mind you, we all enjoy ourselves most when we are focussed and pumped.

The bowling plan was simple. I'd start with Harry and Stevie and then Chico and Brett would relieve them. Daffy would be required and with Tommy and Bruce, would make up the 5th bowler between them.

Harry bowled even quicker today than on any other time on tour. Stevie was back to his brilliant best of two or three seasons ago but the wickets just wouldn't come. Richard Tatwin and Trevor Langa were again giving us trouble just as they had done on previous occasions this last week.

They had put on 41 by the end of the 11th and both our openers had been spelled. Enter Brett Whalley, to change the face of the match. What a hero. The big man was our best player on tour and today was his finest day. He sorted out Trevor for 13 and soon after Chico chimed in to sneak out Richard. Richard skied a ball out to point, where Daffy ran in and despite getting his foot stuck in a crab hole and almost falling over, took a neat catch. As per usual, Andrew Masale was our potential nemesis. The often heard Flanders call of "one before drinks" sparked a moment of madness from the Vanuatu number 3. He tried to half drive, half cut a fullish ball from Brett only to see it creep off his bat and then off his body and hence trickle onto his stumps to just disrupt the woodwork enough for a bail to roll off.

3 for 61 and 11 excited Neddies sauntered off for drinks. Brett and Chico had made vital inroads into the Vanuatu batting line up.

The game was in the balance.

Simpson Obed and Lazaro Carlot were the batsmen we had to contend with next. The brains trust of Brett, Stevie and I felt that this would be a great chance to sneak a few overs through from our 5th bowler. Having all the momentum this week and certainly plenty of it today after his fine batting and useful catch, I thought Daffy should be the first cab off the rank.

His first over was steady but in the next one he was superb and was unlucky to drop a hot return catch off Simpson. Luckily for us though, the ball flicked past his fingers and deviated onto the stumps at the bowler's end and found Lazalo short of his ground. 4 for 80.

Next ball, Daffy turned on even more magic and clean bowled Simpson Obed for 12, and it was great to be a Flanders.

Chico kept the pressure on at the other end during a gutsy 10 over spell that earned him 1 for 35. It was his best spell on tour.

Meantime, I had asked Tom and Bruce to warm up to relieve Daffy but the young kid just kept weaving his magic. He knocked over Ben Kingsbury to leave the Vanuatu boys floundering at 6 for 97 and that brought Tom Clements into the equation again.

In the dicey mood of 6 for 97, he promptly tonked a ball into the horse paddock and was looking very determined and focussed. The light was getting a bit dim and the clouds were rolling in with a whiff of rain in them. I knew we were ahead on run rates and so I knew the batsmen would have to stay on even if the light deteriorated.

Pierre was making a nuisance of himself again and was turning things around with Tom, when disaster struck for the islanders.

Daffy nipped one off the seam and Tom drove powerfully but only succeeded in smashing it to the vice captain and Stevie held on for a screamer at mid on. I didn't even see the ball in the dim light from my spot out at deep extra cover. At 7 down for 108, 208 was looking a long way off.

As I looked around my surroundings, I momentarily forgot about the pressure of the match situation. The coconut palms were enchanting me and the lagoon was rippling. The sun was slowly making its way into the water out to the west. The sun showers had left the legacy of a beautiful rainbow, which arced across the Hippique Park. It really was a heavenly setting. It's a bit of shame I couldn't relax a bit more and soak it in. I even dared to day dream a bit about beating an International side 2-0- but only for a second. I knew we had plenty still to do.

With Daffy continuing to run amok with the batting line up, Tommy and Bruce had to cool their heels in the outfield. It is a real luxury to have two such fine athletes in the team. They cover a huge amount of ground and have great hands to boot. Bruce really put in in the field despite not getting many opportunities to bowl on tour. His commitment to the team was a real treat to see and experience.

Pierre and Ken Natapey hadn't read the script yet however and they caused us plenty of grief. Chico was seen out and Daffy dug deep to bowl his 10 overs on the trot. Daffy finished with superb figures of 3 for 39. What an effort from a fella who had come on tour as a rookie and a part time bowler.

Meanwhile, Pierre was scoring well and was playing with a huge amount of tenacity and grit, battling on despite having pulled a hamstring earlier in the week.

At 40 overs, the score was sitting at 7 for 147. They were close enough if they were good enough. They had two batsmen that were reasonably well set and were handling the dim light, the great bowling and all the pressure pretty handily.

The pressure fell back on the Neddies. Five overs from Brett and five from Stevie would decide our collective fate.

6 runs per over was not a difficult assignment.

Stevie took number 41 and conceded a solitary single. A great start to this final 10 over campaign. Brett went for a 4 but then struck a vital blow by encouraging Pierre to slash at one outside off stump only to see Roey stick out a glove and hang on to a hot one in his keeping spot. Surely that would be the end of the resistance as Pierre trudged off despondently for a fine 33 runs. But Ken linked forces with Nailu Bangalulu and put on another stressful partnership.

They started doing to us, what Roey and Daffy had done to them. The fielding became a trifle over eager and a few fumbles saw the scoring assume a worrying trend.

They ran aggressively and ones and twos were spliced with the odd boundary.

The 46th over went for 14 and that left 4 overs to get 29 more to win. We still needed 2 more wickets. Ken was playing the innings of his life and was middling most of the big shots he was attempting. But this was a Flanders day and more particularly this was the Brett Whalley show and Brett claimed the vital break through in the 48th over when Ken was a tad ambitious and tried to loft Brett over mid on. Chico charged in like a gazelle and took a wonderful waist high catch. With the mounting pressure and the poor light, I felt this was a special outfield catch and it well and truly made up for the one he had dropped the day before.

I have to give it to the Vanuatu blokes that they never give in. At 9 for 187 and only 3 overs to go you'd reckon they'd realise their plight was hopeless and just give up but these blokes are gritty cricketers.

Number 48 went for 6 as did the 49th and that left 11 to win off the final over. It had been 11 off 9 balls but Stevie bowled an unbelievable last three balls in his last over to finish up with three dot deliveries. Stevie's

spell of 10 overs for 42 may have been wicketless but it was just as valuable as his match winning spell in the first International.

So there we stood, 11 mates from Brisbane. Church cricketers of varying talent. Standing on a field on the coast of Efate island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Thousands of km's from home. The rest of our squad and most of our supporters cheering us on wildly but holding their collective breath all the same. Stevie and Brett and I took our time to set the field. The longer we dragged it out the darker the light became. I thought this was a reasonable tactic.

Brett paused for a few moments at the top of his run and all of us tugged down on the brim of our favourite baggy maroon caps. I felt for the big bloke. He had been the hero of the tour- topping the wicket tally and batting well. All the young fellas look up to the icon.

He didn't deserve this sort of pressure, but I reckon the Big Bad man might have just been revelling in it a little bit.

Ball number one was a gem. It pitched on a length and must have just seamed away a bit to beat the bat and unfortunately the stumps on its way through to Roe Dog. 11 off 5. Ball two and three saw the balls smashed but two desperate fielders charged around the boundary to cut the scoring to a pair of twos.

7 to get off 3 balls. A four would still potentially sink us but Brett sent down another pearler to beat the bat again and the ball whistled through to Roey's safe gloves. A single off the fifth delivery and it was 6 to win, 5 to tie and just a solitary ball to go.

Every Aussie kid lives out this sort of fanciful scenario in the back yard every summer. I looked around at my team mates. Every bloke was focussed and steeled to do his bit if the need should arise. I knew then that we'd win because these 11 blokes on the field just would not allow anything but a Flanders victory.

I yelled out to Brett to watch out for no balls. I don't know if he heard me. So there he was, a humble Churches cricketer about to decide the fate of a cricket match against an International team. Greatness was calling and the great Brett Whalley was putting up his hand.

He paused a while at the top of his mark. I scanned the field to ensure no one had moved. I had to have 4 blokes in the inner circle and I wanted every other bloke on the rope.

Then I charged Brett with every one of his team mates willing him onto to success. Even in the dim light I saw the ball very clearly from my spot at cover. It was almost like every thing was in slow motion. Down it came. The batsman wound up with a huge menacing back lift. Then I saw the ball just subtly deceive the bat and it squirted off the bat towards mid on where the huge frame of Brett hurtled after it. I sprinted to the bowler's end stumps and Brett came flying towards me with the cherry safely and securely nestled in this right hand. The batsmen ran a single but there would be no 6 run here today. And that was it. We'd won by 4 runs, and hence defeated the Vanuatu National team 2-0 in the series.

Brett finished with the amazing figures of 4 for 44.

The playing part of the tour was suddenly over. It had rushed past in a blur and our fantasy of playing International cricket was now completed and completed successfully to boot.

We sat around for ages after the game with the Vanuatu fellas. Just yarning and laughing and telling a few tall tales. A few VBs went down. This had been one of our presents to the teams that we'd played against- ten cartons of VBs.

We gave away some bits of kit and the local lads really enjoyed receiving things like old cricket balls and Bruce even gave away his tour shirt and cap in a tremendous gesture. What a fantastic bunch of blokes they all were. It was great to talk cricket with them and relax. The camaraderie between the teams all week had been awesome. This is why we all love team sport- the mateships made on sporting fields are always special.

Emotionally drained and physically exhausted we made our way back to the Melanesian. Lolo's mini bus was the best place to be on the whole of Efate as the boys cut loose with laughter, jocularly and even a few songs.

No one could believe that the Ned Flanders team, a humble bunch of Churches cricketers had taken on a national team and beaten them 2-0.

We convened dinner for that evening at the Port Vila Yacht Club. Brett and Emma, Stevie and Taz and Ginge and I headed out. It was a couples evening. The mood was a bit subdued as we were all shattered by the rigours of the previous week. It was lovely to share the triumph with the girls who all been great support to us as we formulated the tour concept and of course while we played the hectic week of cricket.

The bell ringing moggy was nowhere to be seen and that was a shame for the cat people.

The next day we were scheduled to head out to Mele village, where Pierre and a number of the Vanuatu side came from. Lolo was to pick us up at lunch time.

Some of the young guns had obviously had a big night of celebration the night before and as I sat by the pool after brekky it was fun to watch the troops emerge in various stages of hangovers from their rooms.

Roly and Chico had made a fair old racket at 3 am the night before and despite being the perpetrators, looked like they were in need of some sympathy this morning. There had been dancing without shirts, drinking and a pose down a la a body building tournament at the bar down the street. The photos that were circulating certainly did not do any of the lads justice and only succeeded in providing scraps and snippets

that could be spliced together to formulate the proceedings of what must have been a wild old night for the young bucks.

Slowly the fellas assembled downstairs in the Melanesian foyer before embarking on the Mele trip.

Pierre was keen and Lolo was excited. Ravi got involved and a few familiar faces like Andrew Masale and his two brothers were there to greet and meet us at Mele.

Mele is home to about 4000 people and is the biggest village on Efate. The Mele cricket club is one of the strongest clubs in Vanuatu and boasts a large number of titles and trophies.

Mickey, Sneaky and I wandered around the village streets with Andrew's brother, past all the little houses and the chooks and the ubiquitous pigs. One fat old sow was busy feeding eight piglets. We saw where the chief lived and where the doctor ran his clinic. All the locals were busy enjoying their Sunday's day of rest. They'd all been to Church and were savouring family times. Family is a huge priority over here. Being a village, everyone lives pretty close to each other and even as outsiders we could feel the immense sense of community that permeated through Mele.

Mickey really was enjoying himself on his first overseas trip. The drastically different culture that he was seeing first hand really seemed to broaden his horizons and I hope it will spark a big interest in travelling and all the things that travelling can open up for a person.

By the time we made it back to Pierre's house, a sumptuous smorgasbord had been laid out and the women of Pierre's family had certainly put in a legendary effort with the lunch. After lunch a few speeches were lined up. Pierre thanked the Flanders for coming over and I reciprocated with a speech about our feelings towards Vanuatu and the blokes we'd played against. They presented me with a woven picnic mat and we gave them some cricket balls, and a whole swag of Aussie keepsakes. Clip on koalas and little boomerangs all went down a treat with the little kids.

We cracked open a few more of the VBs that we'd brought for them and there was a tremendous interaction between the two cultures. In keeping with any Neddies bash, we orchestrated a 'Menagh off' and the locals shared the humour and excitement that only a 'Menagh off' can bring. All the locals showed great promise and there were some excellent 'Menaghs'. The sight of the little Vanuatu kids yelling out 'Menagh' was absolutely hilarious.

During lunch, Franky and I had a great yarn to the local GP and we spoke at length about his practice and the way medicine works in Vanuatu, especially at a village level. He had done his training in Fiji and of course tropical medicine was a huge component of what he practices. He saw lots of malaria and gastro and even a few childhood infectious diseases. It sounded like he worked far too many hours and I suppose I really respected and felt for him.

After lunch, we headed down to the beach with the local young blokes. Brett and Mickey had each brought along a footy and a spot of beach touch footy seemed like the perfect culmination to the Nerds versus Julios series that at present stood at a nerve tingling one game all.

It was a great thrill to have Andrew Masale and his brother on the Nerd side and a few pretty boy Vanuatu fellas jumped on the Julios band wagon. The nancy boy Julios did not even look like scoring a try as the magnificent Nerds smashed them with 4 brilliant tries. The Flanders had won the International series and now the Nerds had triumphed 2-1 against the Julios. My week was a complete success.

My favourite memory of the day at Mele was the footy game. It was tremendous to play with some of Vanuatu men instead of against them. We were all young blokes who loved sport and it didn't matter what game we were playing we were happy. The happy and laid back nature of Vanuatu life really infused into their sport and it was lovely to be welcomed into that way of thinking.

At day's end there was not much VB left. There was singing and laughter and a sincere camaraderie that only sport can bring to two races. Sport really produces such great friendships and it transcends all cultural barriers and boundaries. At the day's end, there were hugs all round as we readied ourselves to leave. Ravi, the umpire, got pretty choked up and took his Mele cricket club shirt off and gave it to me in a sincere and touching gesture and I reciprocated by giving him my favourite Hawaiian shirt. It was such a humble gesture from Ravi. Here he was a poor village man giving me the shirt off his back. It seemed very symbolic of the way the Vanuatu people view life. Materialism counts for nothing, and what is valuable is family and friendships.

There was a palpable brotherhood between the Flanders and the Mele people and that is a memory to treasure.

So Lolo took us home and we decided the classy Yacht Club would be the best venue to have our official finale dinner. I thought it seemed to be the classiest venue around and hence was the only fitting spot for the Flanders to have their victory dinner. All 24 members of the touring party came along.

The mood was a tad pensive and even a bit tense and tumultuous. I think every one was tired and mentally jaded after our week of incredible achievement. The strain of living in each other's pockets for nine days was also beginning to tax people's tolerances.

Ginge and I ended up leaving not long after sweets and had a fairly early one.

Our final day was a day to collect a few souvenirs and do a bit of last minute shopping. Pierre collected us all and we headed down town and he showed us where to pick up the best bargains.

I was proudly wearing my Julio beads after purchasing them the day before. I could hardly look Brett in the eye after this great act of Nerd betrayal.

Maybe there isn't a right and a wrong way as far as Nerds and Julios are concerned. Maybe we can learn from each other's culture. Maybe we can all live in harmony. Or maybe I'm just making excuses.

Ginge and I peeled off from the team after a while and headed off to Iriki Island. It was a little island snugly sitting in the bay and a one minute ferry ride saw us setting foot on Iriki. We saw a few tropical fish with their resplendent colours and even a school of cuttlefish as they squirted past the wharf.

We walked around the island, circumnavigating it in about 30 minutes. It provided just a few last lingering moments of tropical relaxation before we were to set out for the airport and hence our normal high stressed lifestyles.

Pierre and Tom Clements met us at the airport to farewell us and I thought that was really touching.

Earlier in the day we'd managed to find a local paper. The Vanuatu Independent had a variety of Flanders stories. They had covered our first International match and given glowing reports about Tommy and Chico.

There were three photos, featuring moments from our games against the Vanuatu under 19 XI and the first International, and also a candid shot of the school coaching gig. Quotes from Roly featured in another story.

I was very excited to see us make the headlines.

The airport provided a novel highlight. There on the departures board was a flight NF 11. Who would believe it. I don't where it was going but I would have loved to have lined up a ticket. It seemed everyone wanted to be part of the Ned Flanders juggernaut.

The flight home was pretty sedate and the only memorable moment came when Franky lined up the purser to announce that the mighty Ned Flanders XI had just completed an amazing 2-0 series win against the Vanuatu National XI. She extended congratulations from all the Virgin staff and then also offered their best wishes for the captain Matt Young and his new fiance Freya Todd. So I suppose, considering what I had put young Mick through at the airport in Brisbane on day one, I had to cop this gee up sweet.

A big crowd welcomed us home, with the Whalley contingent, the Chooks, an assortment of the extended Roe Pack, some Menaghs, a collection of girlfriends and also the great Steve Scally all on hand to meet us. And so ended the best week of my life. The tour had been more than I even dreamed of and the team spirit, the friendships and the immense camaraderie that I felt with my team and the supporters will always be something I'll cherish.

To play cricket overseas had always been a dream and together with 13 mates I had lived my dream. To have ten family and friends come along and share these precious days was a real treat and honour.

These last 10 days will be days that all of us will look back on with pride and fondness.

Money can't buy memories like these.

I can't wait to do it all again.