



BFG FIJI CHARITY NETBALL TOUR 2018

01-15 Dec 2018

MY DIARY – WO1 DEBBIE FAIRCLOUGH

The Beginning

Picture the scene, 24 ladies sat next to a pool in a very nice hotel in Spain sipping Sangria discussing the very successful Spain tour we were just finishing. "We should do this again" said one "where shall we go?" said another, "Fiji!" shouted one of our Fijian brethren. Everyone looked at me, I raised my glass, laughed and uttered the words, "yeah why not, I can do that!" and so it began.

On return to Germany I realised the scale of the task ahead of me (and promised myself never to drink Sangria again!) "Is the tour for the Military ladies" I was asked, "no, for anyone who plays" was my response, "good luck with that" were the final words as I walked away wondering how to move forward. For a moment I thought that maybe it just wouldn't be possible, then in Dec we had some sad news, Annie Wong Vakacegu, a member of the Mansergh Netball Ladies for 7 years had lost her battle with Cancer. We had to do something in Annie's memory and it all started to fall into place. Annie was Fijian, did a lot of charity work at home and played netball so the Fiji netball tour became a Charity Netball Tour and so the work began.

20 ladies signed up, Gulliver's Sports Travel were enlisted to get us there and

planning began in earnest with our Tour Operator Luke. Meanwhile we started fundraising; BFBS interviews, 24-hour Netball-a-thon, curry nights, car boot sales, garage sales, cake sales, raffles, yoga andb even a 100 kms walk in 24 hours (23 hrs and 55 mins to be precise)! Simultaneously we sent a call out to the BFG community for donations; clothes, toys, books and bedding; anything that we could take to Fiji and give to charities. Eurogroup (through Agility) agreed to transport all the donations from Germany to UK and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Milton Keynes volunteered to take the boxes onto Fiji. The British Army Support Officer (BASO) in Fiji agreed to assist us in country and we received grants from the BFG Welfare Fund and SSVF - we were good to go!

Day's One, Two & Three – We are on our way!

On Sat 1 Dec my shepherding duties began as I counted everyone onto the Big Red Bus, provided by the AWS. The excitement was tangible along with disbelief that we were actually going to Fiji. There was a 'slight panic' in Frankfurt airport when one of the ladies was initially refused on the plane (due to a passport number issue) but it was quickly resolved and we headed through security for departures. An uneventful but

long (11 hours) 1st leg to Incheon, South Korea, what an airport! It has to be the most stress-free airport I have ever been in. Free showers, nap rooms and excellent food at very reasonable prices made the 6 hour lay-over fly by (pun intended). In no time at all we were boarding the plane for the last leg to Nadi (another 11-hour flight). On Mon 3 Dec at 8:25 am we landed in a very warm and welcoming Nadi airport. After being serenaded through passport control we were met by the lovely Kaira, Gulliver's Sports Travel representative. We were given a cool face towel, a cold bottle of water and a welcome Lei (a Fijian garland made of fresh leaves and flowers) before being taken to our transport. A short bus ride later the ladies arrived at the hotel, it felt strange be standing round a Christmas tree listening to Christmas songs in the reception, it was 31 degrees outside and felt so far away from the Christmas we know in Germany. The rest of the day was ours to explore, or sleep, as was needed.

Day Four – Nadi

I was very impressed the following morning when at 7:00 am (yep in the morning) I headed to the pool to find almost everyone already up and either in the gym, swimming, going for a run or doing pilates – there is something to be

said for jet-lag on a sports tour! After breakfast we headed out for our first training session. It was only 10:00 am and already 32 degrees outside, no-one was keen to leave the aircon on the bus. Training was split into 20-minute sessions to avoid heat exhaustion and allow regular intervals to rehydrate. Tour caps were just as essential as sun cream and water!

Two hours later, hot and tired, we were ready to get back into the coolness aircon on the bus. As we headed off (running faster than they had in training) the caretaker for the school ask if we wanted some fruit, "YES" came the chorus just as they were told to go and pick our own! I was a little concerned as my risk assessment didn't cover climbing trees! Mangoes anyone?



The rest of the afternoon was ours to do as we wished, many explored Nadi City whilst others made the most of the time to either catch up on sleep or top up their Vitamin D levels.

Day Five – Road Trip

After another quiet night in Nadi (jet lag and heat are an exhausting combination) we checked out of the hotel, met our driver for the next 5 days, Sam, and headed off to the Capital of Fiji, Suva. A 4-hour drive along the coast gave us an opportunity to see the beauty of the Island. Sam provided us with commentary during the journey and gave us a beautiful place to stop and take some photos.



On arrival at the hotel in Suva the ladies

were given an opportunity to explore the city before starting the tour in earnest. I headed to the British High Commission for a bit of admin. Collection of the Charity money we had sent over from our fundraising events, a huge sum of FJ\$12,000 – WOW; we tied down the detail for the donation boxes, 86 boxes of goodies awaited us in the British Army Support Officer's (BASO) garage, sent over through the Diplomatic Bag service by the wonderful Mr Simon Evans from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Milton Keynes – amazing; and finally tie down our contact details and ensure I was added to their 'warning system' 'just in case'. That last bit of admin proved invaluable as later that evening I received a **Tsunami Warning** for the city putting our communications plan to the test immediately. A 30-minute warning for all ladies to return to the hotel (which thankfully was deemed a safe location by the FCO) was issued immediately – all arrived safe and sound and I started breathing normally again!

Day Six – Charity Boxes

Today we get our hands on the donations that left Germany in Nov. The BASO, Mr Daz Dangerfield, kindly volunteered to store all the boxes as they arrived, and now it was time to split them for delivery to St Christopher's Orphanage, Dilkusha Children's Home and Homes for Hope abused women's shelter as per the plan. We arrived at the BASO's house and were faced with a very full garage – it was a good job Gulliver's had provided a large coach to transport us and the boxes.



Dilkusha Children's Home

After a couple of hours selecting boxes for Dilkusha we were off. Sat at the top of a hill, with no vehicle access, we were presented with the task of getting all the boxes from the road to the home – an unorthodox training session ensued with the ladies making a chain up the stairs!! Eventually, with a lot of sweat and grunting, the boxes were stacked up in the day room of Dilkusha and we were introduced to the staff and children with a fantastic welcome ceremony. The

children sang and danced their hearts out before leading us all on a tour of the home. It was heartbreaking to see the cramped confines that the children lived and slept in but each, and every one of them were all happy and positive about their home and their future. One young lady (Anna) has been the very first child from Dilkusha to be selected for one of the best high schools in Fiji by receiving the 3rd highest grade of her age – an amazing achievement from a young woman who has lived at the home since she was a young girl. After a very informative tour, and a good bit of laughter, we were given the opportunity to address all Staff and children to tell them where we were from, why we were there and that we had brought gifts all the way from Germany. The joy on the faces of the children as we opened boxes and offered toys, books and clothes will remain in our memory forever. One box held the full box set of Harry Potter books, when asked who likes them Anna put her hand up and collected them like they were the most prized possession she owned. I mentioned to her a little later that I was envious as I only had 4 of the books, without a thought she offered me the ones I didn't have – I was dumbstruck. I was quick to tell her no, they were hers but that will be an everlasting memory of selflessness.



For over an hour we sat with the children, playing with toys and reading stories, it was a real wrench when we had to leave. We were restricted in what photos we could take as almost all the children were covered by court orders which put things even more into perspective. Plenty of tissues were needed throughout the visit but we all left knowing that we, and the BFG Community, had given them so much joy just before Christmas. After the visit we asked what we could buy for the home that the children would love, a sound system for parties was the response. Due to the short time we had in country Daz very kindly offered to purchase a system and deliver it to the home using the Charity money donated

by the Sparkasse Bank.



Unexpected Surprise

After a quick shower and change we all headed over to the British High Commissioners residence for a very important announcement. WO2 Toni Hill RLC had been pre-selected for promotion to WO1.



Ever tried keeping a secret in the company of 20 women? No? It's not easy I can tell you but I managed it (just)! I was able to arrange for the 'big badge' to be presented to Toni by the Deputy High Commissioner who did us proud! She is the only WO1 who can say she had her promotion presented in Fiji by the Deputy High Commissioner!

Royal British Legion, Suva

After a very busy, but exceptional, start to the day we were back to the hotel for another quick change to head to the Royal British Legion for an evening with the Veterans and the 212 Ladies (the wives of the first Fijian British Soldier's working in Germany in the 70's & 80's).



On arrival we were taken aback by the

number of people who had taken the time to come to meet us. Not only Veterans and the wives but also ladies from the



Disabled Society had come for the evening, and what an evening it was. We were spoilt with a lovely meal and excellent company. One of the 212 ladies brought her daughter with her and after a short chat we realised that we had both been at Cornwall School in Dortmund at the same time what a small world! We took some Germany goodies, Apple Korn



and Strudel, which were devoured as we all reminisced. During the evening we all had the opportunity to find out about other charitable projects that we thought we could help with. The Disabled Society was a new organisation with very little, to no funding available. They were trying to reach disabled people all over Fiji and so were in desperate need for IT equipment. Fortunately, we happened to have a couple of computers, printers and other hardware in the boxes so after establishing that the Orphanage and Children's Home did not need them, we donated them to the Society. We learnt of the Spinal Injury Association (SIA) who look after Veterans with Spinal Injuries and St Giles who provide Psychiatric treatment for Veterans with PTSD and through the generous donation from the Britannia Lodge 843, and other fundraising, we were able to donate FJ\$1000 each to their causes. We also learnt that the island of Baqu is still struggling to recover from the disaster in 2017 and so we separated out some boxes to have sent over to the island including clothes, books and household items. We also donated sports clothing and equipment, donated by Kings School and the AGC Netball Team. We were able to give a FJ\$2000 grant to the RBL Bielefeld, that would be used to provide a larger than normal Christmas party for all

the members free, with transport and a Christmas present for all.

Day Seven - Homes of Hope

The following morning we were up early to collect more boxes, this time for the abused women's shelter Homes of Hope. After a very hairy journey up the side of a mountain in a fully loaded coach (I had my eyes closed most of the way up) we arrived at the home and were greeted by the staff. The boxes were unloaded before being given a brief of the home, again we were asked to not take any photo's of the girls/ladies due to court orders and security concerns, before going on a tour of the facilities. The home was established by an American couple to provide a safe haven for abused women and their children. They take women into the home of all ages (many young teenagers) and almost all of them are pregnant on arrival. The women are placed into dormitory type accommodation on arrival to help them integrate with others but also to ensure there are no concerns of self-harm. Once they have settled they are then moved into accommodation more suited to mothers to be and remain there until the birth of the child. Eventually the women are moved into their own houses in the grounds where they are taught how to run and maintain a house, they are found jobs in the local community and taught how to



manage their money as well as how to cope with being a single mum. They have counsellors and mentors available to them as well as being provided the opportunity to learn new skills. Two days before we arrived they had received training on eco farming and it was very clear to see that each of the ladies enjoyed the course immensely. One lady in particular was completely enamored by the training and had set herself the target to own and run her own farm in the future, she left us is no doubt that she was more than capable of achieving her goal, a very inspirational young lady.

Memorial Netball Match

In the afternoon we headed to the Olympic Pool and Training grounds for

our first netball match of the tour (yes we did play some netball). Vasiti is the President of Suva Netball and was also a team member in the Fiji National side playing alongside our Annie.

We approached her earlier in the year to set up a memorial match in Annie's name with the hope of playing against as many ladies within that National squad as possible, she did not let us down. On arrival we found that 'Fiji time', for once, was in our favour; only 3 of the team had arrived so many of our ladies had the fantastic opportunity to play on the same team as Fijian National players and I had the pleasure of umpiring, although to be fair my whistle was not needed much. After four 10-minute periods Vasiti had a full team and then it got really interesting, and fast. Spectators started lining the court as we were given a wonderful lesson in Netball. The afternoon ended with every single person having laughed and played their hearts out, a fitting



tribute to Annie indeed. We donated the match balls and gifted some netball equipment for the young teams in Suva before heading back to the hotel for yet another quick change.

Carols around the tree

We had received an invite to the Carols around the tree evening in the British High Commission Residence in aid of the Children's Hospice in Suva. We were honoured to accept and grabbed the shoe boxes, lovingly made by the children of Haig School, Gutersloh, to take with us and place around the Christmas tree. They would be handed out on Christmas Day to the children in hospital. The children who were lucky enough to be able to join us were in for a real treat as Father Christmas stopped by



whist we were all signing Christmas carols. Not only did he join in with the singing he also delighted the children (and adults) with some magic. It was a wonderful evening of happiness and song and a fantastic way to end the day.

Day Eight - St Christopher's Orphanage

Today was the day for us to head to St Christopher's Orphanage, after collecting more boxes, and ensuring a good stock of tissues, Sam expertly manoeuvred the bus to arrive in good time at the Orphanage. Sister Karvalo was waiting for us and, once we had unloaded the bus of all the boxes, we settled down for another amazing welcome by the children. What a performance, the voices were amazing but one young lady stood out with a voice of an angel. Unfortunately, like the other two homes we have visited we were unable to take many photo's due to the majority of the children being under court orders.



The Orphanage takes in both boys and girls up to the age of 12 but once the boys turn 12 they are moved to other homes on the island, often a large distance from St Christopher's. This is to protect the young girls living there and, on many occasions, it results in siblings being separated against their will and not meeting up again until they are adults. Due to the generous donation from the Britannia Lodge 843, and our fundraising efforts, we were able to donate FJ\$2000 towards the build of a boy's home on the grounds of St Christopher's. This would stop the practice of moving the boys and give siblings, and friends, more time together.



Police Training School

After an emotional, but enjoyable visit, with the children and staff of St Christopher's we moved to our second netball match of the tour. Two games against the Police Training School Band wives and daughters. We were given a wonderful welcome in the Band room before heading down to the court for what would prove to be the hardest fought games of the tour. We even had our own spectators! Five ladies from the Deaf society, whom we had spent the evening with at the RBL, came down to watch and cheer us on with a gift of fresh fruit for half time. The Westfalen Warriors stepped on court against the wives who started strong and we found ourselves 3 behind by the second quarter. The heat was starting to affect the 'tourists' but the support from our spectators gave them a lift and they went into half time with a slender lead. After some well needed fruit and rehydration they continued the pressure for the second half and came out eventual winners 14 - 5.



Step up the BFG Belles against the daughters. The exceptionally talented youngsters proved too fast for the Belles and they quickly established a healthy lead. The Belles however, did not let the young pups get everything all their own way and put up a good fight. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough and the final score was 25 - 7 to the young ladies. 40 very tired ladies (ok 30 as the youngsters were still going strong) headed up to the Band room for presentations.



The match balls and some netball training equipment were donated and we were then blessed by the women. The ceremony involved the gifting of a significant amount of local cloth and mats. Feeling very humble we headed back to

the hotel to freshen up before returning for the evening ceremony.

The Sevusevu is a traditional ceremony and it was an honour to have been part of this ancient ritual. Mr Ame Raratabu, Annie's cousin and the Head of Fire for Central Eastern Division, very kindly offered to present the Kava on our behalf, as I am not a man and I don't speak Fijian I bit his hand off for the offer!



Our sevusevu was accepted and we were welcomed as part of the family. The evening was an experience none of us will ever forget and unlikely to ever experience again. We were welcomed with a Salusalu each (a traditional Lei that is presented to show love and appreciation).



We were very moved to receive such a beautiful gift that we could take home to remember our new family by. I personally was given the opportunity to stand and speak during the ceremony which was an unexpected honour and quite nerve wracking.

The food was plentiful, and seemingly endless; the entertainment provided by our hosts was second to none, the band played all night and the family members (especially the children) danced and sung their hearts out. After a hard day of netball we thought we would be able to rest but NO, we all danced the night away with our new family.



All good things come to an end unfortunately and we departed late in the evening back to the hotel, tired but fulfilled and nourished not only with food and drink (grog) but also with love and happiness.

Day Nine - A day of Rest

After a well-earned lie-in we all headed out to meet the extended family of the husband of one of our Fijian ladies. When the family heard we were all coming over they offered to host all 20 ladies, at their home. It was an unexpected but wonderful invite, I mean who in their right mind would invite 20 ladies for lunch! We received a few strange looks from the neighbours as our coach pulled up in the village and we all headed up to the house. I can imagine we were the talk of the village for quite some time.



Church

After a fantastic lunch, with excellent company, we headed back to the city for a few hours of our own time before Church. We had been invited to the Ya-rawa Wesley Church for the English speaking service followed by Tea and Cakes. After a little confusion we arrived at the 'right' church and were welcomed by the Pastor. I was offered the opportunity to speak to the congregation to explain who we were and why we were in Fiji before we then headed outside for a

magnificent spread of cakes and buns.



Our last night in the big city was one of mixed emotions, looking forward to the next part of our journey but with a tinge of sadness, it had been such a busy and emotional five days and we all wished we could have given more time to the places we visited and the wonderful people we met.

Day Ten - Navua – Raiwaqa Village

Monday already! We have only been here a week and yet with everything we have achieved it feels a lot longer. Today we had the opportunity to go to a remote village to drop of some more donations (it is only accessible by boat), have a little fun on the river and our last netball matches of the tour. We arrive in Navua early morning, were kitted out for our boat trip, given a safety brief and the boxes were loaded onto the boat.



A Remote Village

It took about an hour up river to reach the village. On arrival we presented our gifts and the village chief gave us a blessing.



From there we were given a tour of the

village where only 50 people live. Most of the men were working on the surrounding hills and the women were sat splitting leaves to dry and make the traditional style mats. We were shown how to husk a coconut local style very expertly using a large metal stake with an extremely sharp tip. A couple of the ladies had a go and we all held our breath in the hope that no blood would be shed. Once through the husk we were shown how to get to the coconut, the knife was almost as big as



the child wielding it.

The village is without running water or electricity. There is a huge satellite that was provided to allow for emergency communications with the main land but as of our visit it had not been connected at the other end so is just a very large eye sore. There are plans to provide flushing toilets and running water and although the rooms have been built they too are inoperable. The buildings have no rooms as such, just open shells, one for cooking and one for sleeping the rest of the time



everyone is outside.

The visit was a real eye-opener, it's so far from how we all live, we even camp in places with more facilities than they live. On heading back to the boats for the next stage of our trip I was shocked to see a young boy, around 9-10 years old, on his own swimming and playing in the river. It was clear he was an excellent swimmer but the river was fast flowing and has the potential to flood very quickly and yet whilst this boy was playing in the river we all put on our life-jackets and climbed back in the boats!

A Cooling Waterfall

A quick boat ride later we had a 'short' walk up a hill to the top where we were faced with a lovely pool at the foot of a waterfall. One by one we all jumped in.

Oh, it was cold and a lovely release from the heat of the day. The visit was not



long enough, and in no time at all we were heading back down to the boats ready to grab some well needed lunch. A fantastic BBQ spread was provided and we devoured as much as we could stomach before our final bit of river fun - tubing down the river. Everyone was given an inner tube, some safety information and top tips before getting into our tubes and letting the river take us. It was just simply brilliant!



An Afternoon of Netball

Arriving back at the village we dried off and swapped wet water clothes for our netball strips. The village didn't have a court so they had made one on the grass behind the house. The 'team' of young ladies didn't own a netball strip so we handed over the Kings School netball strip to their delight. They changed into their new uniform and the games began.



This would be the first time our ladies had ever played on grass (and probably the last) so after a quick brief on health and safety, and a change of the rules slightly to account for the court only having 2 halves rather than 3 thirds, they began

tentatively. For a group of young ladies who don't play as a village team they were very talented. Used to the Fijian style courts, and of course the layout of their back garden, they proceeded to teach us all a lesson in village netball. There was a lot of laughter and not a lot of net-balling skills from our BFG Netter's, some of whom spent more time rolling in the grass than catching the netball. The fun and laughter were contagious, so much so the Mum's and Aunt's wanted a game swiftly followed by the men and boys of the village (rugby anyone?).



Have you ever tried to blow a whistle whilst you are doubled over in laughter? No? Well I can tell you it doesn't work! After almost 3 hours of Netball it was time to say a very sad farewell. We left boxes of books and stationery for the local village school and donated various netball equipment to go with the strips that I know will be worn with pride. It is hard to believe that all of this happened in just one day, it was amazing in so many different ways. We headed off to our last hotel before our trip back to Nadi, it was a very quiet night with everyone being exhausted from the day's activities.

Day's Eleven, Twelve & Thirteen - The last part of our journey

An early start with a 3-hour drive ahead of us. The penultimate destination being the Funky Fish Resort on the Island of Mololo. On arrival at Anchorage Resort we swapped the bus for a boat, said farewell to Sam (our honourary BFG Netter) and the mainland for a couple of days. The hour boat ride just wasn't long enough for me (but too long for others who held it together just long enough), having spent the previous week and a half counting ladies on and off buses, answering "where do I have to be?" "When?" "What do I have to wear?" and having 'Fiji Time' thrown at me by everyone I could finally relax. For the next 2 days there were no plans and no pre-arranged activities. Many of the ladies wanted to just chill at the resort, making use of the pool and the access to

the beach and sea. Others decided to join some excursions to see other islands. Snorkling, swimming, local dancing, massages, and even fishing for sea grapes (that were then on the evening dinner menu).



Beachcomber Island Resort and Cloud 9, which is a floating platform in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, were visited and whilst snorkelling around the platform a couple of us were lucky enough to swim with a turtle (ok so the turtle swam off when he saw us but we were in the same patch of sea)!



Day's Fourteen & Fifteen - Home Time

And there it was - gone! The two weeks seemed to be over in the blink of an eye and yet we achieved more in the 10 days than we ever thought possible. Our last night was spent in the Tanoa International Hotel in Nadi from where we would head back to the airport at 8:00 am the following morning. A quick visit to the newly erected monument of Sgt Talaiasi Labalaba a member of the the Royal Ulster Rifles (RUR) and who passed SAS selection in 1966, unveiled in Oct 18 by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex,



and of course another group photo this time around the Christmas tree before the trip home.



The return trip included an over-night stop in South Korea, Seoul so the adventure still had one last twist and more shepherding duties. Departing Fiji in our summer clothes we donned winter clothes on the flight for our arrival in Seoul which at -6 degrees was a shock to the system. From bikinis to woolly hats and thick coats in just 11 hours.



A leisurely breakfast, a rather crazy bus ride and we were back at the airport. The journey ended as it started, with a 'small' scare, as one of our ladies was detained by security! Her tour bag had flashed up as having been in contact with explosives! Thankfully it was all settled fairly quickly and we were on our way home.

Landing at Frankfurt was a bitter sweet experience, elation at finally getting off the plane but sadness and disappointment that the adventure couldn't last a little while longer. Back on the big red bus (compliments of AWS) I was expecting it to be a very quiet journey home but that was not to be. Jet lag and adrenaline from our experiences kept everyone awake, singing and just talking about everything we had done.

Return to reality

A year's worth of hard work from the ladies on the tour with the assistance, and amazing support, from the rest of the BFG Community and all the external agencies made this tour possible. We achieved so much, for so many and none of it would have been possible without all of those who supported us. It is safe to say, sat in Spain not one of us really believed we would get to Fiji, it was a nice pipe dream and, even though we had only just landed, none of us could really

believe it had actually happened! It is an experience that we will never forget and will unlikely ever get the opportunity to do again.

Thank You

There are so many people that helped me, and our team, to get to Fiji and to help us give so much to the Fijian community and we are indebted to each, and every one who helped.

Grants

The **BFG Welfare Fund** and **SSVC** both gave us a grant towards our personal contributions. Without those generous grants we would not have been able to achieve half of what we did due to financial constraints.

AWS provided a grant to cover our tour clothing and of course provided a 'big red bus' to and from Frankfurt airport.

Sponsorship

The following provided sponsorship towards our tour:

Gullivers Sports Tours

Britannia Lodge 843

Charity Donations

The following either donated to the charities we were supporting in Fiji or provided us the opportunity to raise more through our fundraising events:

Grant & Green Car Sales

NAAFI

Britannia Lodge 843

Royal British Legion Bielefeld

Sparkasse Bank Sennelager

P&O Ferries

PRI Paderborn

PRI Gutersloh

PRI Bielefeld

BFBS

Agility and EuroGroup

FCO Milton Keynes

QM Bielefeld

The BFG Community

Achievements

All events throughout the year resulted in us achieving the following:

Macmillan Cancer Research - €2856.58

Fiji Charities - €5734.92 (split between 12 different charities in Fiji)

86 MFO boxes of donations