

## **Val visits the team 2 weeks before departure**

Silouetting the peaks of the Brecon Beacons, the setting sun daubed the darkening sky with luminescent blotches of cloud, silver-lined and shimmering orange. The team were on their second training weekend and after a day's off-roading were practising their camping skills at the Riverside Campsite, just outside Bronllys on the way to Talgarth.

There had been incessant rain the day before; the ground was water-logged as we traipsed round the campsite looking for them. Mist was already rising from the Usk, the noisy river, gurgling and splashing, at the bottom of the site. Caravanners, with zipped up awnings, giving the appearance of mobile 4 room bungalows, were snugly ensconced for the night; their television aerials, and electrical hook-ups bringing them all the joys of 'home from home'.

A call to Kiko guided us into the most hidden corner of the campsite; she waved us in like some Jumbo Jet with her trusty, white chopping board glowing in the gathering gloom! And there, what is to be home to the team for the next five months, was the Driving Home ensemble. 'Beryl', Colin's Discovery, made one part of the 'L', whilst the 'Brenda' the Defender made the other part. The boys' tent peaked on Brenda's roof, towering above the thronette, delicious smelling steam wafted from the large enamel cooking pot simmering away on the stove on Brenda's back door. Awnings off both Land Rovers afforded some sort of roofing, and the pot-bellied bar-b-q from 2 Nursery Drive, filled with logs, issued forth the ubiquitous outdoor requirement - flames, and clouds of smoke which chased everyone around at the whim of the wind, giving everyone the earthy, evocative smell of campfire.

Colin's tent, extending from Beryl's rear (so to speak) showed a spacious place where hopefully there is enough room for him to manoeuvre in his chair. A ladder leads up to the girls' tent; canvas alone separating them and the nocturnal sounds emitted by happy campers!

Kiko and Chrissie were busy preparing the evening meal; Ben was assembling the new dual fuel lamp donated by Dr Anne Griffiths and her husband Richard, the Doc was practising his surgical skills, using very much more primitive tools than he is used to and dismembering limb by limb a small oak tree. Woody was setting up the spot light and Cols was supervising the proceedings. Everyone had their own jobs, but they were all working together as a team.

Steve, the photographer from Avandale who had spent the day with the team was taking his final shots as the team prepared for the night. As he included me in the final shot of the team he said that he'd heard I was a 'strong' woman. Resisting the temptation to believe that he was referring to my wiry, muscular build, I told him that it's not the cards you're dealt in life, it's the way you play them that counts!

The Doc took time out to show us the footage of the film he'd shot during the off-roading. J V Like, the Land Rover dealers in Three Cocks had spent the day with the team donating their time, expertise, off-roading course and several other bits and pieces for the expedition. Colin at the wheel, we watched as Beryl drunkenly skewed and swayed as she approached a very deeply rutted track, filled with chocolate coloured gunge. Gunned by Colin, she ploughed through the mire; slowly, slowly, however, she

ground to a halt, water and mud up to the middle of her radiator. Our trusty photographer revealed that the deeper she had gone, the more her rear tow hook had sunk into the morass, finally stopping her in her tracks. Greatly excited, I thought we were to experience some winch practise, but J V Like, in their bright yellow Land Rover, ran a hitch through the front towing point, and hoiked her out of the mud. Despite getting stuck, I think that Colin, doing real driving at last, was secretly experiencing a little bit of heaven! His broad grin gave it away!

Benny Baracus, guiding Brenda with gentle hands, was the next to go through - Brenda lurched dangerously, a bow wave forming over her bonnet, and a silver-birch sapling brutally bent as the Land Rover fought through the mud at an angle of 45<sup>0</sup>.

Brenda and Beryl were through. Having been mesmerized by the action, it was only when another cloud of smoke crossed the mini screen that I realised it had been doing so throughout the filming. Was the Doc endangering his life during the course of his filming? Was he standing beside some fire roaring through the dried bracken and underbrush?

No!! He was endangering his life alright, but not by standing in fire - the ubiquitous fag was either clasped firmly in between his fingers, or precariously hanging from his lips, as he wielded the video camera!!

Dinner was served as we finished watching the day's footage; chillies and coconut milk gave unusual but delicious flavour to a hearty looking curried stew and unusual but very red looking colour to the faces of both the Doc and Woody. Little rivulets of watery snot ran from the Doc's nose, the steam emitted from his body, fogging up his glasses, and beads, large beads, of sweat glistened as Woody removed his Crocodile Dundee hat and mopped his brow on the back of his sleeve. Chrissie and Kiko, on the other hand, blithely helped themselves to another generous dollop of freshly cut chilly, their demeanour fresh and peachy!

The sun had completely gone and the temperature was dropping rapidly. Despite the stoked fire, the Everest Yak hat which became Colin as much as a bonnet would become a duck, and the Doc's blanket draped around his shoulders, I could see that the cold was needling its way through all Colin's layers. It was bad enough for the rest of us, keeping warm through our movements, rubbing our hands over the fire, but it just emphasised the severity of the challenges Colin will be facing where temperature is concerned. In outdoor conditions there is no way of getting warm once the heat has been lost from Colin's body, sleep then becomes impossible and the consequent knock-on effects become serious. The aim has to be to stop that happening especially as the next time they'll all be together will be the real thing; no more dress rehearsals.

For me, a mere mother, it was really wonderful to see the culmination of all the work the team had done in preparation for their expedition; the planning, the fund-raising, the endless wheedling for sponsorship in kind. Needless to say, with only 2 weeks to go before they depart these shores, it stirred up countless feelings of apprehension with all that can potentially be thrown at the team; not just Cols. It will be no mean feat this expedition; the vagaries of the African continent and the volatility of its politics and its people will, I am sure, present the team with challenges that even they haven't even thought about.

Their preparation, however, has confronted every eventuality they can think of. It is really going to be an experience of a lifetime and I wish them all collectively and each individually all the very best for their journey, but more than that I hope for each of them that the experience will, in whatever way particular to them, stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives.