

Lance Thomas

Worked with EO	from November 1981 to September 1985
Age on joining EO	26
Nationality	Australian
Role at EO	Leader/Driver
Expeditions/Brief Encounters etc. led or taken	<p>Kathmandu to London in 1979 (May departure) as an Expedition Member led first by David Hunter (to New Delhi) then Alan Townsing.</p> <p>In 1982 I did a one week training trip Kathmandu to New Delhi (with Kevin Philips), led a Kathmandu/London as far as Karachi (group flew to Damascus as Iran was closed)</p> <p>I then drove empty back to Srinagar and costed the next season of Kashmir/Ladakh Brief Encounters and led part of the first trip before swapping with James Hogg to finish his London/Kathmandu overland. After a holiday, I flew back to Kathmandu and helped with the start of the first Himalaya Overland trip. After that a London / Kathmandu – this time only US and Canadians had to overfly Iran. Following this a Nepal, Ganges, Rajasthan Brief Encounter.</p> <p>Back to London then to run the first Cradles of Civilisation. I started the second Cradles trip but handed over to Rene Muller and flew to Dar es Salaam.</p> <p>I did a 4-week East Africa Safari (with Jeremy Cattell) followed by two Gorilla safaris and another 4-week safari. Then drove AOR622J solo and empty to Johannesburg to refit her (she had been in East Africa for two years and was a bit of a wreck) with Bobby Balcon.</p> <p>Back to Kathmandu for a Kathmandu/London overland. Then in late 1984 a London to Johannesburg followed by a Johannesburg /London via Sudan, Egypt and the Middle East.</p>
Why did you want to work for EO?	I enjoyed my first overland in 1979 and wanted to see if I was up to the challenge of leading overlands.
Occupation before joining EO	Technical Officer with Australia's River Murray Commission. (Job involved regulating the river.) After arriving in London in 1979, I did several temporary jobs in London before getting a job as a driver with Tracks Travel doing European coach camping tours for the 1980 and 1981 seasons.
Occupation after leaving EO	Thirty years in Australia's defence and immigration departments.
Now living in	Canberra, Australia.

Then photo(s)	Now photo(s)
 <p>With Kay, Equator, Zaire 1985</p>  <p>Iran 1984</p>	 <p>With my family Brittany, Kay, Zac and Chelsea December 2016</p>

Memories or anecdotes

It was early June, 1984 and I was leading a Kathmandu – London overland. As usual we spent five days on the houseboats in Kashmir. We heard there was trouble down in Amritsar in the Punjab - something to do with a Sikh uprising or rebels and the Indian government had closed the borders around the State of Punjab. This was a problem for us because the only way we could cross from India to Pakistan by road was the border post at Wagah between Amritsar in India and Lahore in Pakistan. I thought it was most likely that the problem would only last a few days. Rather than be too bothered about it, I decided we would head up to Ladakh and hopefully by the time we came back we'd be able to resume our westward journey.

I had not been able to get any news in Ladakh about developments in the Punjab despite asking around at several official establishments. After three days we headed back to Srinagar where I tried again to find out what was happening at the local police station and even at a United Nations office. Still no one knew what was happening. The only choice was to head down the mountains to the Punjab to see for ourselves. There was really nothing else to do. All the while I had in the back of my mind that if this was to be a long-term problem, I could end up stuck on this side of Asia and would probably have to arrange overflights and wait around for eastbound trips. I had been promised a trans-Africa as my next trip after this Asia overland and I was determined not to miss out on it.

So we headed down to Jammu. Passing the checkpoint located on the border between Jammu & Kashmir and the Punjab was no problem but not far into the Punjab we came across a military road block. Three armoured personnel carriers were parked across the road so that all vehicles had to zig-zag between them. We were flagged down and had to stop. I thought initially that this was as far as we were going to get but after explaining to the officer in charge who we were and our destination and he made a quick call on the radio, we were allowed to pass.

Not much further on we were stopped again in a small village where the army appeared to have set up a temporary command post. The army troops were clearly nervous and we still had no real clue as to what our fate might be. A young guy in plain clothes, who looked to me to be in his early twenties was there with the army. He spoke some English but that even 'some English' could be considered an exaggeration. He asked for all the passports and proceeded to look through them but it was quite obvious he absolutely no idea what he was actually looking for and didn't understand them. He was confused by some of the passports which had been issued in places other than the country of the passport's nationality. Great, I thought, we have a real mental giant here but there was nothing I could do other than try to explain to him as best I could with his limited English why this was so. Then he demanded that we unload the trailer so he could search it for weapons. I told him, again, that we were tourists and certainly had no weapons on board. He was getting quite edgy. Obviously, no-one had figured on a group of tourists turning up in the middle of their soon-to-be war. Again, he insisted we unpack the trailer therein the middle of the village. I told him I would not do that because there were too many people around but if there was somewhere else that was safe and quiet I would be happy to unpack it.

We were then taken to a small enclosed army compound and started to unpack the trailer there. The young fellow was having a cursory look at the bags but was soon called over to a field telephone in a nearby tent. He looked to me to be talking to a superior officer and I told the guys unpacking the trailer to just take it slowly because I half suspected we would be moving on rather shortly. I was then called over to the telephone and found I was speaking to an officer, probably of reasonably high rank and who was somewhat calmer than the local chap. I explained to him we were a group of tourists on an organised trip from Kathmandu to London. He was extremely polite and asked what we had in the trailer. I explained it was just our bags, tents and some spare parts for the truck. I went to explain that the reason I refused to unpack it earlier was simply because there were so many people around and I did not think it was safe for us to do so. He asked me to assure him that we were not carrying any weapons which of course I was able to do quite emphatically. He replied that he would "take my word as a gentleman" (obviously a great judge of character) and would instruct the other fellow to let us be on our way.

We made good progress towards Amritsar but while still some distance out we came to another road block in a small village. It was early afternoon by now and we were told it was too dangerous to go on. We still had no clue exactly what was happening to have the army out; and no clue at all what was going to happen next but I had the feeling that eventually we would be allowed to proceed. We waited and waited. We filled in some of the time by having lunch, buying some chapattis from a local baker.

Finally, a little after five o'clock an army jeep sped towards us. A very well dressed and well-spoken young army officer jumped out when it stopped and said we would soon be able to head off but just need to wait a little while. That little while turned out to be another couple of hours. Finally we left with this army officer and a couple of armed soldiers. By now it was pitch black. We later found out the reason why we had waited so long in the first place was because this officer had been called back from leave specifically to take care of us.

There were no other vehicles on the roads partly I imagine because of the time of night but I suspect there may have been a curfew or ban on road traffic. Every now and then we came to a roadblock and there was always a vigorous and agitated verbal exchange between our soldier escorts and those at the road block. I think they needed to establish quickly that we were friend and not foe. At one point, I heard what seemed to be some very odd noises coming from the back of the truck. It turned out that the group was signing, probably to relieve the tension.

Finally, around 1am we came to another roadblock about two kilometres from the border. It turned out the over the last few hours we had somehow circled around Amritsar and arrived on the other side. We could go no further so we all slept on the truck. About 5am daylight arrived and the village started to stir with morning business. The army very kindly provided us with breakfast.

We thanked our escorts and made the last couple of kilometres to the border post at Wagah. I felt pretty good having taken a chance and having it pay off. When we arrived at the Wagah border post the customs and immigration officials were obviously rather surprised to see us. They said the border was closed! Great, what a letdown. What to do? I explained what had happened overnight and it was finally decided that the only way we might get through the border was to get permission from the Assistant Commissioner (of what I never did discover) in Amritsar. I convinced the OIC customs to let one of his officers come with me to show me where to find this Assistant Commissioner and also then they could be certain of the Assistant Commissioner's decision if he said we could depart through the border.

Leaving most of the group at the border I headed into Amritsar. Amritsar's streets were very quiet, not the usual hustle and bustle of India's cities. This was understandable in view of what was clearly a tense situation. We arrived at the local courthouse and after another wait the Assistant Commissioner finally showed up. The customs officer explained to him why we were there. The Assistant Commissioner looked at me then at the customs guy and with a real sense of disdain in his voice replied "well the border's only closed to people coming in. People can still go out." After some polite and hurried "thank-yous" I was out of there in a shot.

Normally we would use up our last few rupees on diesel and food but this time I decided to give it a big miss and get through the border before anyone changed their mind. Back at the border we were processed through Indian customs and immigration but just before we were about ready to leave I was asked by one of the officials to go to see the Chief of Customs. The only thought going through my mind then was that it had all turned to custard and we would be turned back. However, it was not to the case. The Chief of Customs simply apologised to me asking for my understanding in view of the circumstances. I gracefully, and with immense relief, accepted his apologies and said that I fully understood the difficulties he was working under and thanked him for the assistance he had given.

Finally we were away and passed through the now open gates of the border post and waved to the guards as they waved back. As we drove through a little Pakistani man carrying a huge white sack on his back went through at the same time. The Pakistanis told me later that the poor guy had been waiting there for nearly a week trying to get out. We pulled up at the Pakistan customs building and we were all immediately invited inside to sit under the fans. We were offered tea and cold drinks. This was all very welcome as it was very hot outside. We were the only travellers at the border and the only ones to come through from India since the emergency began. Several comments were made about how much better things were in Pakistan compared to India! We didn't take long to get through the formalities and were soon in Lahore.

As far as I can determine, while we were driving around Amritsar in the middle of the night, the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine for the Sikh religion.
