



# The Advocate Weekender

TASMANIA'S ONLY SATURDAY EVENING NEWSPAPER

FIRST  
WITH WEEKEND  
NEWS AND  
SPORT

## EXCLUSIVE REPORT

# Couple's African trauma

By Nigel Tapp

FORMER Devonport man Tim Penton and his English-born wife Jane are recovering from a traumatic ordeal in West Africa, which left them with little to show for a seven-month world trip.

The couple was among 16 international tourists grabbed at gunpoint by Tureg bandits between the Mali and Algerian border posts on May 15.

They were stripped of most of their possessions and dumped at Timiuen, near the Algerian border about seven hours later.

Mr and Mrs Penton hid details of their ordeal from their families till they arrived in England last week.

Now they feel safe to speak about the life threatening experience which occurred in a supposedly safe area.

Speaking from his parents-in-law's Cheshire home Mr Penton said the tourists felt the cold steel of AK47 machine-guns for most of the seven hours.

Mr Penton said it was only the cool nature of the tourists which saved them from being killed.

"Some of the rebels were as young as 15 years old and if we had pushed them too far anything could have happened," he said.

"But everyone on the tour was fantastic and remained pretty calm.

"No one went into hysterics and I think everyone had absolute confidence that the others would do the right thing."

## Coastal man robbed, held at gunpoint

Mr Penton said the group's Bedford truck was first stopped by six armed bandits, but this soon grew to about 30.

He said the group was refused access to any personal possessions in the truck's trailer such as photographs and video cassettes.

"They spoke Arabic and French and kept saying there was nothing to worry about, but we did not really believe them," Mr Penton said.

Mr Penton said the rebels' mood quickly swung from friendly to hostile.

While the tourists were released unharmed, Mr Penton said he had no idea what happened to their guide, who the rebels refused to release.

Some West African authorities said the guide could have been shot while others indicated that it was more likely he was beaten up and sent home.

Mr Penton said while they were glad to be alive he was also very angry.

"We lost everything. We have virtually nothing to show for seven months of travelling."

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THE TIMES THURSDAY AUGUST 20 1992

## Forthcoming marriages

### Mr S.C. Blake and Miss F.J. Hussey

The engagement is announced between Simon, eldest son of Mr and Mrs G.D. Blake, of Loxley, Warwickshire, and Fiona, daughter of Mr and Mrs D.A. Hussey, of Nayland, Suffolk.

### Mr S.S. Hobhouse and Dr S.L. Bush

The engagement is announced between Sebastian, younger son of Sir John and Lady Hobhouse, of Chelsea, London, and Sarah, elder daughter of Mr and Mrs Graham Bush, of Kampala, Uganda.

### Mr P.M. Keville and Miss C.S. Page

The engagement is announced between Mark, son of Mr and Mrs Robert Keville, of Shipley, West Sussex, and Kate, daughter of Mr and Mrs Colin Page, of Seale, Surrey.

### Captain E.T. Legard and Miss L.F. Kirkpatrick

The engagement is announced between Captain Edward Legard, 13th/18th Royal Hussars (QMO), younger son of Sir Charles Legard, Bt, of Malton, North Yorkshire, and of Mrs Patrick Hibbert-Foy, of

### Mr N.O. Preston and Miss A.F.H. Davies

The engagement is announced between Nicholas, elder son of Major and Mrs George Preston, of Corfe Castle, Dorset, and Annabel, younger daughter of Mr and Mrs John Davies, of St Stephens, Canterbury.

## Marriages

### Mr G.F. Hopkins and Miss B.E. McLaren

The marriage of Mr Gary Hopkins and Miss Belinda McLaren took place on Saturday, August 1, 1992, at Holy Trinity, Clapham Common.

The reception was held at The London Hilton on Park Lane.

### Dr A.R. MacDiarmid-Gordon and Ms L.J. Horrocks

A service of blessing was held in St Anne's Church, Sale, following the marriage of Adam Robert, only son of Mr and Mrs Niall MacDiarmid-Gordon, of Bonchurch, to Lesley Jane, younger daughter of Mr and Mrs M.A. Wicks, of Buxton, on August 1, 1992. The Rev John Surin



**EXCLUSIVE REPORT**

Story:

Nigel

Tapp



# Coaster tells of his ordeal being held . .

# AT GUNPOINT

**A FORMER Devonport man and his English-born wife consider themselves fortunate to be alive after being held hostage at gunpoint by bandits in West Africa last month.**

Tim and Jane Penton and 14 other tourists were held by machine-gun totting Turegs — some as young as 15 years old — for about seven hours in the Sahara Desert between the Mali and Algerian border posts on May 15.

They were stripped of most of the possessions they accumulated during a seven-month world tour and left with only day packs.

While the tourists — from Australia, England, Canada, Switzerland, New Zealand and the Netherlands — were dumped near the Algerian border they have no idea what happened to their guide, who the bandits refused to release.

Some West African authorities believe he was probably shot while others argue he was more likely to have been beaten and told never to bring tourists into the area again.

The pair hid most of the drama from their families, but now in England feel free to speak about their harrowing encounter.

Speaking from his parents-in-law's home in Cheshire earlier this week, Mr Penton said the Encounter Overland tour — which they joined in Tanzania on January 18 — had skirted known rebel and bandit areas after it left Mali on May 13.

They were meant to be in a safe region when the unwelcome visitors arrived.

Mr Penton, who was born, raised and educated in Devonport, said the first sign of trouble came when he noticed six men in a four-wheel drive speed up behind their Bedford truck waving AK47 machine-guns.

"I thought we were just going to be robbed when they stopped the bus," Mr Penton said.

However, the bandits removed the driver after bringing the truck to a standstill and replaced him with one of their own men.

Two other rebels sat with the tourists menacingly brandishing their guns.

"They spoke Arabic and French and kept saying there was nothing to worry about, but we did not really believe them," Mr Penton said.

Mr Penton said the six were joined by about 24 more bandits as the truck sped through the desert for about 20 minutes.

He said the bandits stopped again and fear began to well inside the tourists.



Former Devonport man Tim Penton.



Jane Penton

"We did not know whether we were going to just be robbed or shot," he said.

"At that stage the rebels had not been too bad, but we did not know what was going on."

Mr Penton said the rebels attitude changed when the driver got their truck stuck in first gear.

"The leader told us that they did not want to harrass us so they would fix the truck and then let us go, but when the truck was fixed the driver ordered us all out and threw our day packs on the ground,"

Mr Penton said.

"They made us stand by their side as they ransacked our day packs and took all the money they could find as well as cameras.

"They searched our money belts as well, but quite a few of us had hidden money in our pockets when we saw them coming and they did not search anything but our belts."

Mr Penton estimated the bandits got \$US6000 because most people were low on cash as it was near the end of the tour.

He said many

**They spoke Arabic and French and kept saying there was nothing to worry about, but we did not really believe them.**  
— Mr Penton.

people asked for their films and video cassettes which were in the trailer.

"We told them they were no use to anyone but us.

"However, this only made the bandits mad and they piled up and our day gear back into our truck with guards," he said.

Mr Penton said they were driven around for another 20 minutes as the bandits tested to see that the truck was fixed.

The most horrifying section of the ordeal lay only a few kilometres up the road when they were herded into a naturally forming rock cul-de-sac.

Mr Penton admitted he expected to die.

"No one said anything, but I knew everyone though it was the end," he said.

"I was just waiting for us to be ordered out and then it would be all over."

But as fate would have it the bandits had simply taken a wrong turn.

"There was a fair bit of relief when they turned around and left," Mr Penton said.

"They had just got lost, but we did not realise that at the time."

After being driven around for another 20 minutes the group was once again ordered out and given their gear.

Mr Penton said the group was then given a choice — they could either be driven to the Algerian border or back to the Mali border.

They chose the Algerian border, their planned destination.

Mr Penton said the group was piled into the back of a four-wheel drive and driven at high speed across the desert.

"It was a four-hour trip across gullies and rocks," he said.

"It was not very comfortably as we did not have much room with all our gear and spare tyres, water and fuel.

"We all ended up horribly bruised."

Mr Penton said a girl on the tour fainted at a rest stop and the rebels agreed to give the group some time to recover.

He admitted the trip did have some light-hearted moments such as when his hat was blown off and he demanded the rebels stop and return so that he could retrieve it.

"They actually did stop and turn around. I had lost so much all ready, I was not prepared to lose my hat as well," he said.

Mr Penton said the group was dropped at the border town of Timiuen at about 7 p.m.

"They just told us to get out, waved goodbye and sped off into the desert," Mr Penton said.

"The locals were pretty amazed to see 16 tourists walking out of the desert."

Mr Penton said the group was taken to the police station where food, water and blankets were provided.

"The police were

really great and even let us sleep in the station overnight.

"The following day they organised transport for us to Tamarrassat, in Algeria."

Mr Penton said the locals were embarrassed by the actions of the bandits as tourists were not normally targets and groups with women were never attacked.

"They wanted to go and get the rebels and the Algerian Government arranged with the Mali Government for a search party to be sent out," he said.

"We have not heard anything yet, but they said we would be kept informed."

Mr Penton said the tour company had offered to fly the group members to destinations of their choice, but all had agreed to continue the tour so the company arranged a vehicle.

Mr Penton said it had been a very tense ordeal.

"If we had pushed them too far anything could have happened," he said.

"But everyone on the tour was fanatic and remained pretty calm.

"No one went into hysterics and I think everyone had absolute confidence that the others would do the right thing."

Mr Penton said that now he had time to look back on the incident anger had overtaken relief.

"I am now just plain angry," he said.

"We lost everything. We have virtually nothing to show for seven months of travelling."

He said the couple had survived the ordeal with no lasting side-effects.

"I expected to still be having nightmares, but it is fine," he said.

Mr Penton said they did not regret making the trip, but would not return to the same area again.

"Apart from that small technical hitch we had a great time," Mr Penton said.

He said the couple had made no definite plans on how long they would stay in England.