

A man, a truck and a world to wander

Words: Kevin Childs | Image left: David White

DAVE Johnson is at the wheel of a huge truck full of tourists in Africa when they start jumping off. In his rear-view mirror he watches in astonishment as many of the 21 on board leap from his slow moving vehicle. He pulls up to find the back of the truck filled with snakes dislodged by the truck from an overhanging branch. The snakes are not dangerous, so after getting rid of them and calming the tourists, he drives on.

Another occasion when some passengers decided to leave was when he drove a truck down a road cut into a precipice, heading to a national park in South America. The road was one-truck width, but with two-way traffic. Meeting an oncoming vehicle Dave had to back up until he found a space where they could pass, his wheels near the edge of sheer drop of hundreds of metres down to the jungle floor. That's when some walked.

Just how this Glenlyon resident, CFA stalwart and resilient stroke survivor became a safari driver is a tale he tells with glee. It goes back to a childhood fascination with engines.

Growing up in Edgware, North London, and then Hemel Hempstead, about 40 kilometres north of the city, he used to help his mechanic-turned-postie father fiddle around with old cars. "That stood me in good stead in later years," he says, his accent still strong after many years.

Yet it was cabinet-making that the young Dave set his mind on before he even started school and he would not be dissuaded. Perhaps he would become an engineer, his parents wondered, as he came top in maths, woodwork and mechanical drawing, while also doing well in geography.

But at 15 he turned his back on school. "It was probably the best day's work I ever did in my life," he says of his decision to begin a six-year apprenticeship in cabinet-making. Most aspects of woodwork were studied, even specialist stuff like marquetry. But in his late 20s he was technical manager of one of Britain's biggest furniture companies, travelling widely to trade fairs in Europe and enjoying his company car and a good salary.

What would he do with this money? Buy a Land Rover and drive from London to Johannesburg. That was in his mind when he found an ad for safari drivers.

Dave wanted to find out what made safari vehicles tick. He wrote off and was invited to a seminar in London. Some 400 people turned up and were given a long form to fill in.

This narrowed the field to 70 who showed up for a weekend seminar where an experienced driver did his best to talk everyone out of going any further. But Dave still wanted to learn about the vehicles, so he put his name forward and was about 12th out of 28 who qualified for an assessment weekend. Up trundled a 27-seat Bedford truck. Out the door went one of the candidates, with an oath about not driving that.

As a rigorous assessment got under way, the ever-confident Dave spoke out. "Give me a box of bits and if you want a truck, I'll build you a truck," he said. "Fair enough," said the workshop manager, asking him to assemble a gearbox from scratch.

Having shown he could do this, Dave then joined a competing team and pile of bricks and a grill from which a barbeque had to be made and a meal cooked. Using a trolley designed to load bombs, his team of five moved the bricks and had a meal on the go before the opposing team of six could transport their bricks by hand. It was all about showing initiative.

In those days, he says, it could take 12 days to cross the Sahara Desert, the only markers being 44 gallon drums of cement with a stick poking up at regular intervals. No GPS then.

"What if you break down?" asked a would-be driver.

"You fix it or die," was the reply.

By now Dave had seen some of the safari trucks and was becoming hooked. Along came an offer to sign up as a trainee. To his family the idea of letting go of a well-paid job, with a company car, to drive a truck seemed more than a little bonkers.

For six months he learned to strip wheels, change bearings and much more while the years working with his father bore fruit.



Dave rose to be a long-haul driver, making the 25,000km London to Nepal journey in six months. At the height of these safaris for the wealthy, his company had 32 trucks on the road as he drove through the Middle East, Asia, the Soviet Union, virtually everywhere, except North America.

In that time he noticed how people's attitudes changed as a journey progressed. Those who may have been arrogant and condescending to other races and colours at the start changed when they had to deal with people in a place where everyone was African or Pakistani. Ochre-haired Zulu warriors were welcomed on board for a lift.

In the land of the mountain gorillas, however, his safari days were to begin winding down for he met an Australian nurse called Karen. The ultimate long-distance romance began as Dave flew from London or South Africa to Melbourne in a courtship that lasted a couple of years. Eventually he got a visa and moved here.

He and Karen spent weekends at Glenlyon and over five years he built a home. Once they moved into that they rented their cottage - called Kibo, which is Swahili for hippopotamus. In Glenlyon, too, he set up a workshop to make hand-crafted furniture, working for architects and others on fine jobs such as helping and supervising a fit-out for the World Bank in Abuja, Nigeria.

At 67 Dave looks back on 19 years in the 102-year-old Glenlyon CFA, including four as captain. His story steadily unfolds until, bang! He claps his hands. "Then I had a stroke." It was 2012 and he was quickly sent from the local hospital to Ballarat and then by air to the Alfred. After surgery he was bed-ridden for three months. Work on the new Glenlyon CFA station had just finished. He tendered his resignation but it was rejected.

Three months in a wheelchair followed, the same amount of time on a walking frame. The damage by the stroke left him walking in arcs. A year of physio at the hospital saw him beginning to walk properly. He credits Samantha Redlich at Xistance Gym with teaching him how to walk in a straight line. After two years he's still a regular.

For a long time he could only go upstairs in his home by holding the rail and moving sideways. Karen had to help him back down. Then one day, out of the blue, he found himself with a cup of tea for her, going up of his own volition. He smiles with delight.

His bliss with machines extends to his '86 Land Rover, bought when new, and the two trucks in the Glenlyon station. The new truck was part of an almost \$1 million building and re-equipping program that he oversaw, with a little luck and what he calls dogged persistence. Such persistence has taken him a long way.