

# A Story By John McVey

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## Preface

Like most people at my age I have plenty of tales to tell, the following story is just a taste of what it was like to travel overland in a lorry to the Middle East Countries and back. I only did two trips, one to Baghdad and one to Kuwait, and then I concentrated on Europe for a couple of years, mainly Italy.

There were men who did Middle East for years and went to far away places like Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I am not going to get into the detail of Middle East Transportation because that is not what this is about. I am simply going to talk about a few of my life experiences.

I am going to write this story in the same manner as I travelled, bear in mind I was not a tourist, I was not on holiday or safari, or making a documentary for TV, there were no camera crews in Land Rovers or fleet of back up crew, I wasn't going the long way round, down, up or sideways, I was simply trying to get there and back as quickly and as safely as possible.

This was a job, and I was paid so much per trip, so the faster I completed the journey the more money I made, if you are not already bored, please read on you might find it interesting.

John

For the little ones

**T.I.R** (This Is Ridiculous)

**T.I.R** is actually the official abbreviation for Transport International Route, which was a treaty between European and some Asian countries, allowing goods to be transported by road under customs seal without inspection (sometimes).

To say it was occasionally a little bit farcical is being kind, hence **This Is Ridiculous**.

Having left school at 15 with no qualifications I spent a couple of years working in retail (men's clothes) and then joined the RAF where I spent the next 4 years. I left the RAF complete with a Heavy Goods Vehicle driving licence so started driving lorries for a living.

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While still in the RAF I married Katherine and settled down to have a family.

I had done a little long distance in the UK but at the age of 25 I was driving tipper lorries carrying stone to building sites. This work soon became tedious and one day I was waiting to load at Ellel quarry, near Lancaster, when I got talking to a guy who was between trips to the Middle East.

In the mid 70s the oil rich states of the Middle East (M/E) were buying anything and everything they could lay their hands on but the problem was getting it delivered.

The ports that serviced the M/E were not developed enough to be able to accommodate the big ships that were arriving daily, with all sorts of goods so ships were waiting months to be discharged.

Overland transport by lorry was the answer and it soon became very big business.

Well, this sounded just like the adventure I had always fancied and in a matter of a few weeks I was off to Kufa south of Baghdad with my road train heavy loaded with engineering equipment.

Katherine and I had only a few months earlier taken delivery of our first beautiful son Andrew James and I hated leaving them but as ever, Katherine was so supportive and encouraging, she made it easier for me.

Well I was so green; I had no idea what I was in for.

Katherine will fill in the exact dates I'm sure but I think it was late October 1976 when I left Preston lorry park late one evening to drive to Harwich to catch a ferry to Hamburg.

That first night travelling down the M6 I have to say I thought I had made a mistake taking on this journey into the unknown, already I was missing Katherine and Andrew enormously, but I had committed to this trip and was determined to see it through.

I arrived at the port of Harwich early hours of the next morning and got my head down.

The following morning I set about the complicated customs job. I had been given very little training, and had no idea how complicated the paperwork involved in taking a loaded lorry overland to the Middle East was.

I was one of four William Jackson drivers booked on the same sailing, the other three were light loaded with insulation all going to Mosul, northern Iraq, they were all

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experienced M/E men and made it plain they would not be waiting for me, not that I blame them, Christmas was round the corner and they intended being home for it.

Anyone that knows me knows that I prefer to go it alone.

I could at this stage explain in detail the different customs procedures, rules regulations and protocol but it would bore the reader to tears so I will cover them as and when, I will just mention though that as my lorry was a road train it was classed as two vehicles so had two sets of paperwork.

I somehow managed to get the customs job sorted and that afternoon I was steaming out of Harwich aboard the Prince Oberon bound for Hamburg.

On arrival at Hamburg I found a Bank and changed all my traveller's cheques to Dollars, I decided I was not going to be looking for banks in every country between here and Baghdad and guessed Dollars would be welcomed everywhere. I was right.

In those days to carry goods for reward you had to have permits for each country, Billy Jackson had no allocation of these so instead of the direct route through France and Italy in to Yugoslavia, I took the German ferry to Hamburg which entitled me to a fifty Kilometre permit to travel and that got me in to East Germany where permits were not required, just Dollars.

My first customs problem was at the West German border crossing to East Germany. When re-building the tilt covering on the trailer after loading at MIFT (Manchester International Freight Terminal) I had missed a couple of eyelets when feeding the TIR cord through, so the West German customs decided to have a look inside. Lesson one learned.

East Germany was covered in one hit, mostly concrete motorways but I do remember going through Leipzig and Dresden and other smaller towns. The weather was cold and wet with some snow which made the cobbled roads that all eastern European towns seemed to favour treacherous.

In no time at all I was in Czechoslovakia and had caught up to the other three, not bad for a first tripper I thought, but as they were so much lighter loaded than me I soon lost touch again, I was to happen upon them again much later in Mosul, Northern Iraq.

I won't dwell too much on the journey through Czechoslovakia, Hungary and in to Yugoslavia as it was quite uneventful and I have better stories to tell of those places on "the flip side" (the return journey)

Down through Yugoslavia and across Bulgaria (on the next trip I was to fall very sick with food poisoning in Bulgaria) next stop Kapicule, the border crossing between Bulgaria and Turkey.

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Kapicule was to be the next real test.

The Turks had a very complicated system of road tax which was on a sliding scale relating to load value and my load was extremely high value at almost £500,000. I had plenty of money with me but this made a big hole in my wallet. Obviously Billy Jackson had not allowed for this.

I had to pay an agent to do my paperwork at Kapicule, you were not allowed to deal direct with the officials and you had to use a "runner" in my case a young lad of about twelve years of age to take your paperwork and passport to the agent's office, there was no other way believe me, anyway within a few hours my paperwork was completed and returned to me by my runner who demanded his "baksheesh". (gratuity)

At the time when paying for any official tax of any kind in Turkey you had to pay in Turkish Lira but you first have to buy the local currency using Dollars or Deutschmarks, they would not take Sterling by the way.

Next stop The Harem Hotel, Istanbul.

This was a popular stopover for western drivers, who were welcome to use the facilities even though not booking a room.

Not one to hang around next day I'm off over the mountains to Ankara then over Tarsus to Adana.

I have met plenty of interesting people on my travels and I will try to remember their names and tell you bits about them as we happen upon them through my memoirs.

I met up with a gang of Brits somewhere around Ankara and travelled with them for a few days. Again these were all experienced M/E men and helped and advised me quite a lot.

One of the guys was called Terry, he was from somewhere around London and we got on really well, he was also going to Baghdad and we travelled some of the way there together.

At the time the roads in Turkey got worse the further south east you travelled, over Tarsus Mountains sometimes there was no road and frequently you would see dead lorries laying upside down in the valleys below, no exaggeration, honest.

Terry and I were travelling late one night down a military road in eastern Turkey where the Kurds live when I suddenly hit a massive pothole and struggled to keep

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control of the vehicle. Terry was ahead of me and he told me later that he just managed to avoid the same pothole; he carried on unaware of my difficulties.

The encounter with the pothole had moved one of the big lathe type machines in the trailer and it was bulging the side out. This was a potential problem as if it broke the TIR cord I would have customs issues at the next border but, as it happened this did not become a difficulty until much later in this story, indeed on “the flip side”.

Anyway I had lost touch with Terry and was not to meet up with him again until The British Club, Baghdad.

So far there had been few light hearted moments, in fact the difficulties and dangers meant you had to take everything seriously and always keep your wits about you.

During my travels I have had my passport taken off me at military check points and been “detained” in eastern bloc countries, southern Turkey and Damascus, I have been confronted by soldiers carrying machine guns, I was in Baghdad during a military coup and have been threatened at knifepoint, all routine events in the life of a M/E man.

Next stop the border between Turkey and Iraq.

This was a comical crossing, it was exactly what you would expect, busy, manic, mad, disorganised. At one point I entered the wrong timber built barrack type building only to find a long table with Iraqi soldiers enjoying their lunch, they insisted I join them and whatever it was that they gave me to eat was very welcome.

## **Baghdad**

I have to find an agent, clear customs and get the load guarantee released.

In those days Baghdad was a very busy city, bustling with activity and very difficult to find your way around, 99% of signs were in Arabic and very few people spoke English, anyway I managed.

The load guarantee is to ensure all import taxes are paid before the load is delivered to its final destination and you are not permitted to leave the country without evidence of this. A local agent has to be used and the one I found was a lovely man called Mr. Meanus, not sure how to spell his name so I have spelt it as it sounds.

I spent my first night in Baghdad parked up on some spare ground close to the “British Club” where I had a couple of drinks and guess who turned up, Terry. If I remember correctly Terry and I had quite a lot to drink that night, and the local retired British Colonel tried to have us ejected but we were having none of it.

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Next day Terry was on his way as he had done his paperwork, I was to move to a "compound" outside the city which was in fact the desert where I was to wait for Mr. Meanus to bring me mine.

I would at this point like to mention that I always felt welcome in the M/E countries and found the Iraqi people to be especially pleasant. There were a few exceptions and I will be covering these as and when.

Next day still waiting, and I notice that where the previous day there were many western lorries, now only a few remain and those appeared to be unattended, I am told by a couple of drivers that some sort of military coup is occurring and they were off to the airport and suggested I do the same, but while I was considering what to do Mr. Meanus turned up with my completed paperwork, he mentioned the local military uprising and suggested I take my guarantee certificate and leave.

Well, I'm not sure but I think he meant for me to go home, anyway I decided to carry on to my destination which was about 110 miles south of Baghdad.

I arrived at Kufa late afternoon the following day.

I had a telephone number which I was to ring and somebody would come and guide me to my delivery point.

Finding and using a public telephone in a town in Southern Iraq proved to be far less difficult than I expected and soon I had parked the lorry and was being taken to the home of the British manager of the company I was delivering to.

I spent a nice evening with this family and slept in a real bed, it felt very civilised.

The following day we set about unloading the lorry, and straight away concern was expressed about the bulge in the side of the trailer, but thankfully the machine within was undamaged, it took most of the day using an overhead crane to unload, but by tea time I was on my way home.

I was to return to Istanbul where I had the name and address of an agent whom I was to contact to arrange a back load.

I was soon north of Baghdad and motoring towards South East Turkey. Northern Iraq is quite mountainous and even with an empty lorry some of the bends with their sheer drops required careful negotiation. It was on this dusty, mountain hugging road that I encountered a man who whilst cradling what appeared to be a dead dog was waving for me to stop. I did not like the feel of this situation one little bit at all, and I have to confess that I slowed but did not stop, to be fair the man although appearing to be distressed looked healthy enough and though traffic was very light one of his countrymen would be along before much longer.

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I have pondered that situation many times over the years and I always come to the same conclusion that I made the correct decision, in those days Northern Iraq was well known to be a dangerous place so it would have been foolhardy of me to take the risk.

I mentioned earlier that the border crossing between South East Turkey and Iraq was comical, well on my return the experience was quite different, it was cold wet and grim and it took me two full days to get through. I was so depressed and missing home so much that I could hardly bear it.

During my International Road Transport career I would continually swing between highs and lows and sometimes become very lonely, I always liked to travel solo so I would sometimes go days without actually speaking to anybody, this is just the way it is and as they say in the RAF, "if you can't take a joke you shouldn't have joined up"

Winter was certainly starting to get under way, I remember I had a bad cold and the cab heater was not working, it had never worked but only now into December did it start to become a problem.

I got back to Ankara and it was so cold the diesel started to freeze; it actually turns to a jelly like substance.

I remember I was at this café that was used by western lorry drivers as it had plenty of parking, it was rough ground but they let you park free if you used the café.

This particular night it was so cold nobody could sleep, so all the drivers huddled around a fire that we had built using anything we could find that would burn.

I was standing chatting to a few other drivers when out of the darkness came a pathetic looking figure, this man approached the fire and just stood there saying nothing, he had frost all over his face and the top half of his clothed body.

I said to him "are you alright mate" he said nothing, so we tried to warm him up and gave him a brew.

After about 15 minutes he started to speak, he said "I must have fallen asleep in the driver's seat and when I woke up my hair was frozen to window, I thought somebody had hold of me at first, and then I couldn't get free and I just got colder and colder."

Anyway he survived and the next morning people started to get on their way.

I managed to get my engine started but could not get enough power to move, so I found a local garage and the mechanic came to my assistance, we discovered that the thermostat that controlled the temperature of the engine and coolant was missing, as in not there, no wonder the heater didn't work.

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On my way again and before you know it I'm parked in the car park of The Harem Hotel, Istanbul.

The next morning I'm in the agent's office and it's not good news, we are well in to December, I think it was 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> and back loads were thin on the ground, I would probably have to wait at least a week or go home empty.

I pondered this situation over a glass of cay (tea), sure I wanted to be home for Christmas but I wasn't about to go home empty, then the agent, who was a very pleasant and helpful man suggested I fly home and come back in the New Year when return loads would be plentiful and better paying.

I liked this idea but there were a couple of problems, firstly, I didn't have enough money for the flight and secondly, my passport was stamped with the details of my lorry, this is done when you enter Turkey and is only cancelled when you leave Turkey complete with your lorry, this is to stop people illegally selling their lorries!

I put this to the agent and he immediately offered to pay for the flight and suggested I take a chance with my passport at the airport.

I decided to go for it but I would phone HQ to tell them what I was doing, not that anything they said would deter me, I had decided what I was going to do and that was that.

In 1976 International calls were difficult and had to be booked in advance, sometimes you could wait 24 hours and the very nice agent had booked me on a flight that same afternoon, so the agent sent a telex informing William Jackson & Son of the arrangements.

There was no time to waste, I had to get back to the lorry which was on the other side of Istanbul at The Harem Hotel, gather my things together and find a Young Entrepreneurial Turk to mind the lorry. I think it cost 50 Turkish Lira in advance and 50 on my return, if the lorry was intact, quite reassuring for me and not bad money for a 10 year old street urchin, considering he would probably be doing the same deal for many drivers over the Christmas period.

The agent suggested I present my passport to passport control, open at the photograph page, but I decided that if the vehicle stamp was discovered I was going to act dumb (not too difficult) and explain exactly what my intentions were, I was only going home for Christmas after all! So there would be no cloak and dagger stuff, I would simply hand over my passport and take my chances.

Istanbul Airport, passport control, I'm booked on a KLM flight to London Heathrow via Amsterdam, I've got my bag in one hand and my passport and ticket in the other,

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to say I was a little nervous was putting it mildly, but tallyho!! I handed my passport to the officer and looked him square in the eye, he thumbed through my passport a couple of times and suddenly stopped at the page that contained the vehicle stamp, he looked me in the eye, glanced down at the page, looked at me again and handed me back my passport and gestured me to move on.

## **Home for Christmas**

I reported to the office soon after my arrival and assured them that I would in fact be going back to recover and back load the lorry for England.

I arrived back at Istanbul Airport early in the New Year, I was pretty miserable, but hey ho, find a taxi and get back to the lorry.

I got in the back of a taxi and the driver gestured he was going to wait for another fare, so I decided to get out and find a different taxi, but I could not open the door from the inside so I started to climb over to the front of the car to get out that way, the driver was doing his nut but I made my escape, fending him off as I climbed over the front seat and out the front passenger door. I wasn't about to be whisked off in to the night trapped in the back of a car in Istanbul.

I found a different taxi, the driver opened the back door for me to get in, before I did I checked the inside door handles worked, it was clear the driver knew why and on the way to The Harem Hotel he explained to me in quite good English that some unlicensed taxis would overcharge and not let the occupants out of the car until they had paid.

I arrive at The Harem Hotel car park to find the lorry just as I had left it.

I was exhausted and wanted to get my head down but the cab was cold and damp, so I started the engine to warm her up a little, as soon as I did the Young Entrepreneurial Turk popped up to collect the remainder of his fee.

I was to re-load for England at a place called Sinj, a small town just outside Split on the Adriatic.

Belgrade, Banja Luka, Sarajevo, these are familiar names now because of the troubles there, but my recollection of these places is very different to those images shown on the TV during the wars.

I have fond memories of the National Hotel, Belgrade, a popular stopping off point with western lorry drivers; I remember the challenging winding roads through the

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forests and over the mountains, Banja Luka and Sarajevo, the peaceful Adriatic resort of Split, it made me sad to watch on TV the carnage and devastation to those beautiful places and the unbelievable cruelty to the people all over the former Yugoslavia.

I remember I arrived at the Adriatic resort of Split on Saturday afternoon, so it would be sightseeing for Johnny until Monday morning.

I remember little detail of the town, but I do remember that I thought it was a very nice place. Shops and restaurants fronted the picturesque harbour where two American war ships were tied up.

I would at this point like to warn any visitors to this area that the beer is ludicrously strong, on Saturday evening I had few with a couple of American sailors and could hardly move all the next day.

Monday morning I'm off to the village of Sinj to load boxes of raw cotton, then back to Split to do the customs thing.

## **Homeward bound**

If I only had permits for Italy and France I would be home in four days, but instead I have to go in the wrong direction down the coast towards Dubrovnik, then swing left to Mostar, over the mountains, Sarajevo and up to Szeged, then in to Hungary, this is a long and tedious route, heavy snow and winding mountain roads meant progress was very slow.

Budapest, Bratislava up through Brno into Czechoslovakia, *problem!*

Remember I told you earlier about when I hit a pothole in South East Turkey and the load shifted causing it to bulge the side out, well it had weakened the weld on one of the eyelets that the TIR cord passed through and this was discovered when crossing into Czechoslovakia, in fact I'm going to go in to more detail because it's quite a good story.

It was about 6pm I had passed through the Hungarian side of the border and had done my customs paperwork and passport, and the seals had been checked at the Czechoslovakian side.

I was about to set off when an immaculately dressed army officer decided to take an interest in my lorry, I'm not kidding, this guy was the real deal, full tunic with amazingly shiny buttons and row upon row of medal ribbons, jodhpur trousers and knee high boots, bulled to perfection.

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Well there he was casually jack booting his way round my lorry when he stopped, lifted his riding crop and pointed to the place where there was an eyelet missing. My heart sank as he removed his brown kid leather glove and slid his hand up under the tilt cover whilst bellowing at his underlings, what I imagine was a few hints on inspecting TIR sealed vehicles.

I had to unload the trailer so that it could be inspected for whatever I might be smuggling, a bit of a nuisance, but it only took a couple of hours or so and once re-loaded and the necessary protocol entered on the documents, I was away again, but not before the aforementioned army officer stood to attention, clicked his heels and gave me the smartest salute ever, I nodded and went on my way.

I was up through Czechoslovakia in no time at all, but I must have gone wrong somewhere as I found myself late at night at a remote border crossing with just one guard with whom I shared a brew.

I remember vividly the mountainous area, virgin snow covered the ground and weighed down the branches of the tall fir trees, a real picture postcard setting, and there standing all on it's own a hut with a guard and a simple lift up barrier. Where was the customs? Where were the automatic weapon brandishing nervous looking border guards?

It was surreal, but that's how I remember it.

East Germany was once again despatched in one hit, and soon I'm at the West German border.

German guards were swarming all over the lorry, probably looking for drugs. They emptied the cab of my meagre possessions and searched them thoroughly, and one of the guards was encouraging a sniffer dog in to every nook and cranny on the lorry.

I have to say I was more than a little nervous as, though I was completely innocent of any wrong doing, there were stories of drugs being secreted on to lorries by the bad guys, to be recovered by accomplices on reaching there destination.

I must say that I did enjoy travelling through the eastern block countries; there was an air of mystery and exciting adventure about it, but everywhere seemed to be gray and dull, yes beautiful architecture in Cities like Prague and Budapest, but everywhere looked so tired and neglected. When I crossed over to the west it was as if someone had switched the lights on, like going from black and white to Technicolor.

Well, there's not much more worth writing about that trip, I was home safe and 100% definitely not going again.

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## **Trip Two**

I spent the next five months working in the UK, but I had this itch and no matter how I tried, I couldn't scratch it.

It was early June, Kathy was two months pregnant and I'm off to Kuwait with a dodgy open TIR load, dodgy own account permits and working for an even dodgier geezer I had met in Istanbul on the previous trip.

The long suffering Kathy was as ever, loyal, selfless and supportive, she is to write her own account of the following eight weeks that I am to be away from home, mine follows.

I am driving a Magirus Deutz (Maggie) tractor unit with a stripped down tilt trailer, loaded with eighteen portable toilets that I loaded at Portakabin, York.

The portable toilets were about the size of an old red telephone box and eighteen just fit nicely, two abreast in the stripped down tilt trailer, the hinged sides of the trailer could be lifted into place and secured, but the superstructure of the trailer could not be re-built as the portable toilets were to tall, so I would have to travel "open TIR"

I will now try to explain to the reader two terms that will crop up during the pages to come, firstly, "open TIR." This means the load will not fit in the confines of a vehicle approved by the TIR regulations, these vehicles can be sealed so as not to allow anything to be added or taken from the loading compartment without breaking the customs seal.

Open TIR means that you are likely to be scrutinised much more closely at any border crossing, so it will probably take twice as much time entering and leaving each country you transit en route to your final destination.

The second term I will endeavour to explain is "own account permits to travel."

I explained the permit thing earlier, but this is different, own account permits were for use by companies carrying their own goods. For instance; you are a furniture manufacturer and you are delivering product using your own transport to a depot owned by you.

I know that transporting eighteen portable toilets, manufactured by Portakabin in York to Kuwait Oil Company, Kuwait was going to be tricky, but I'll manage.

Dover to Ostend this time, in to West Germany, first problem!

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I had a "belly tank" slung under the trailer containing 300 gallons of red diesel which I would start using when I got past Austria, but I would have to "T form" it through West Germany and Austria.

This is a simple operation, just fill in a form pay a fee and the belly tank is sealed on entering the country and the seal checked when leaving, but when the nice man with the wire and lead seal arrived he could not attach it to the filler cap as it had no hole for the wire to pass through.

I'm off to get a hole drilled in the filler cap, but first I have to learn how to ask for it in German.

"Haben sie eine bohrmaschine bitte?"

Necessity is certainly the mother of invention; I had a few breakdowns over the course of both trips, but nothing major. I lost a hinge pin from the A frame of the trailer (this couples the trailer to the lorry) on the first trip, this lost me almost a day. In those days once you got past Western Europe it was easier to get things repaired, people had to be more self sufficient on the road as professional help was very thin on the ground. I remember it was quite common to see a Turkish lorry at the side of the road, the driver changing the clutch, gear box or back axel, while the rest of the family had got camped down, and Mum was busy making dinner.

I climbed up an embankment, armed with my large metal filler cap, and set off to find someone that had eine bohrmaschine.

I soon came upon an industrial estate and found a man in a factory who was happy to use his bohramaschine to modify my cap; he drilled his hole, rubbed it down a little, presented it to me and said "good"? I inspected the engineers work, and with a big smile on my face replied, "good!"

I'm off like a whippet, motoring across Germany and into Austria, all is going well and I'm thinking, this is going to be a doddle, I'm light loaded, I've got good roads at least as far as Turkey and it's flaming June.

I spoke too soon, studying the map in Austria; I saw I had two low bridges in close succession, under normal circumstances the TIR tilt trailer would fit under these bridges, but my load was a good twelve inches taller, which was the reason why I could not re-build the superstructure of the trailer.

I had no alternative but to try and get under these bridges, so, on the approach to the first I stopped and let as much air out of the tyres as I could and still be able to drive the lorry without damaging the tyres, as my load was relatively light this should not be a problem.

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I gingerly approached the first bridge and she went under no problem, the second bridge was higher so would be no problem at all. Wrong! I think a bit of road surfacing had taken place since my road atlas had been printed, and because the tractor carried the front of the trailer higher than the rear, the first couple of pairs of portable bogs were too high for the bridge, so I had to remove the pyramid shaped roofs from them, then I could get on.

I had to travel quite slowly until I could find a garage and re-inflate my tyres. I soon came upon a fuel station, purchased almost a full road tank of diesel, paid for the use of the air gun and when I asked to use the washroom. I was refused!

I made good time across Austria and down through Hungary, in to Yugoslavia and a stopover at The National Hotel, Belgrade.

I had probably been on the go for about five days now so I was ready for a short break.

I had worked out that, without delays, I could cover five hundred miles a day and I would have to if I was going to make it pay, but beyond Austria there would be no motorways and the main trunk roads, once you get in to Turkey, wind their way through small villages, over mountains, where sometimes the road was barely a track and in parts of south east Turkey and Jordan, no road at all.

Fresh from an overnight stop at The National, I was making very good progress through Yugoslavia and then Bulgaria, and before you can say "baksheesh colleague" I'm back at Kopicule.

So far the open TIR thing had not been much of a problem, but the Turkish customs people were not too keen on it, but eventually I managed to convince them that there was nothing hidden round the bend in my portable bogs.

I enter Turkey and head for the Mocamp at Istanbul.

I remember on the first trip, between Kopicule and Istanbul, there was the wreck of a BRS (British Road Services) M/E spec Leyland Marathon; it was upside down in a ditch at the side of the road, - it was still there!

It don't arf make yer fink!

I stopped off briefly at the Mocamp in Istanbul, (another popular stopping off point for western lorry drivers) just to get cleaned up and eat something that hadn't come out of a tin, but I'm not hanging around, so far, apart from a few minor delays I'd made extremely good time and was not about to spoil it by getting camped down, drinking Turkish beer with a few western drivers. I didn't really drink much in those days anyway.

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Turkey is a beautiful country; it has everything really, from Ancient Cities to rural villages, rugged mountains with barely passable roads to flat landscapes where you can see forever. Istanbul and Ankara are real cosmopolitan Cities, I don't know what it's like now but in those days South East Turkey seemed almost third world compared to other parts, but nevertheless the whole region gave you a feeling of historical mystique.

I have some wonderful memories of my travels, not just the M/E but also Europe, in particular the old eastern block and of course, wonderful Italy, my favourite place in the whole world apart from England.

I'm giving it big licks now, motoring down the southern Mediterranean, heading for Syria.

Up to now I've been on fairly familiar territory but now I'm at the border between Turkey and Syria, a place called Bab Al Hawa. I was delayed half a day here, but was kept entertained by the kids selling anything and everything, they would wave their goods at anyone that looked remotely English and shout "aurence look" "aurence look" I did buy a traditional Arab headdress and in fact still have it.

In those days, travelling through Eastern Block countries, Turkey and M/E countries in general, it was not unusual to be confronted by armed Police, Soldiers or other officials.

I'm not suggesting they were brandishing their weapons or anything like that, but I have had more than a few stressful encounters, in particular I remember one time I was somewhere in Turkey when I was stopped at a random checkpoint and this soldier carrying an automatic weapon got in the cab and started poking around to see if I had anything he fancied for himself. I had very little with me that was worth fighting for, apart from money and my passport, both of which were always about my person, and to be fair all these people wanted was a little baksheesh, they wouldn't dream of stealing anything, it's just the culture to invite a gift maybe, cigarettes would usually suffice, I didn't smoke but it was wise always to carry a few multi packs. This guy though took a shine to my Kodak Instamatic, and I was not for parting with it as it would be the only record of my adventure. I remember I had to be very firm, this soldier had my camera grasped firmly in his spare hand, the other was cradling a very tasty looking self loading rifle. I reached out to take back my possession and at the same time glanced down at the weapon, his eyes followed mine and he realized what was in my mind, he could not have been more apologetic, he didn't speak English, he just kept saying no, no, no, and patting me on the shoulder having handed back my camera. The poor man was so embarrassed, it obviously had not occurred to him that he was carrying a gun and I might feel threatened.

I must make it clear at this point that whilst on my travels, the vast majority of people I encountered, be they military or other, were friendly and helpful.

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There were a couple of occasions when I became a little nervous, once just outside Damascus, I was detained and my passport taken off me, I was kept in a large tent for four hours or so and given no explanation, in fact hardly a word was spoken, this was very disconcerting. Another time I was at an oasis on the tap line in Saudi and was being pestered for cigarettes by a gang of local youths, I had no cigarettes left but they would not take no for an answer and when I became, shall we say, a little firmer in my manner, the big boy among them (he looked about fourteen or fifteen) pulled out a knife and started toward me, well I didn't know what to do, so I backed up towards the lorry as he shouted some Arabic abuse at me, and then they all ran off in to the night.

Damascus - what a fantastic place! I don't know how I managed to negotiate that city, at the time there was not one direction sign in English or for that matter Arabic as far as I could see, and the traffic which, typical of any town or city this side of and including Istanbul, ranged from horse and cart to tank transporters, oh yes there's going to be plenty of military presence from now on.

The journey down through Syria was fairly uneventful, though this would not be the case on the flip side.

I just have a short hop through Jordan, where I get a few second hand tyres fitted by two very nice locals whose photograph is framed and currently on the wall in the downstairs bathroom of my house, then a thousand miles of tap line.

I'm going to digress here, I am compelled to talk about a film made a couple of years later, it was a BBC documentary called "Destination Doha" and it was about M/E overland transport.

I am in no way going to criticize the programme, it was very entertaining and in fact I have it on DVD (if you are reading this in the year 2020 DVD is a very old media format) the programme follows three ASTRAN (Asia Transport Services) vehicles on their journey, it was quite accurate apart from a couple of things that are hilarious.

There are these four drivers, (one was also a mechanic and was to recover a 140 Scania road train that had been abandoned) all good down to earth lads, three were very experienced M/E men and one was on his first trip.

Let me remind you that the object of the exercise is to get there and back as quickly as possible.

These guys actually went skiing in Austria, OK they were week - ended (In some European countries, lorries are not allowed to travel after noon on Saturday until 10pm Sunday) but still very unrealistic.

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Then there was the bit where they were astounded because they could not cash Barclays travellers cheques in Jordan, now I don't mean to be picky, but come on, Astran had been pioneers in M/E transport, how could they not know that Barclays Bank, with it's connections to those of the Star of David persuasion was not popular in the Arab States.

But by far the funniest of all was when they were about to take the barrel road, which was a short cut across Jordan, about one hundred miles of hard desert, called the barrel road as 45 gallon drums had been placed at irregular intervals to keep you on course.

Just picture it, there they are, standing by the side of the road peering in to the desert, when the one described as the "thinking mans lorry driver" provides the best "Crocodile Dundee" moment of all time! He looks up at the Sun, then down at his watch, and with his arm outstretched, he points and says "it's that tangent" well I nearly broke a rib laughing - just follow the barrels!

Actually to be fair many of the barrels had become buried, but it was hard desert and you could easily follow the tyre tracks, plus there were plenty of other lorries about, in fact you were really supposed to travel in convoy, but I couldn't be bothered with all that.

The tap line is a thousand miles of pipe carrying oil through Saudi Arabia, and the road runs along side it.

I had met up with a couple of likely lads from London soon after entering Saudi and they both had air conditioning (A/C) in there lorry cabs, so were going to rest during the day and travel at night when it was cooler and there would be less chance of tyre blow outs.

I had no A/C so being stationary during the heat of the day was not an option for me, so I would have to take my chances.

In those days the road was good tarmac one minute, the next you would be negotiating a layered tarmac ramp down on to the desert for a few miles and then back on the tarmac, all good fun.

I would have to travel no faster than 30 mph to minimise the risk of tyre blow outs and just when I thought I was doing well, BANG!

I pulled off the road in to the desert and attempted to change the wheel, but I don't think I lasted ten minutes before I had to get out of the Sun.

There were only two oases, strategically positioned along the one thousand mile road, and I reckoned I was about half way between the first and the second; I had loaded up

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with water so I should be alright for that, but I would have to wait until the Sun went down before once again attempting to change the wheel.

OK let's try again. I have jacked up the axle having already loosened the wheel nuts, and am levering off the wheel, it is still very hot and I'm struggling when a Mack with GB plates pulls up and the driver alights from his air conditioned cab, walks towards me and says in a heavy cockney accent, "it's ot init". We change the wheel, share a brew and while I'm packing the tools away he gets on his way and I never see him again.

I motor on down to a place called "The Mirrors" where I hang a left and head for the Saudi/Kuwait border

Saudi Arabia is one of a few countries that require you to obtain a visa from the Saudi embassy in London before you can visit or transit the country. I had done so, or so I thought, but unfortunately I had stamped in my passport an entry visa, where I should have a transit visa.

The Saudi side of the border consisted of a couple of wooden huts, inhabited by a few guards and an official immaculately dressed in white Arab robes.

The official was not amused at all about me not having the correct visa, and just kept shaking his head from side to side while I tried to explain that it was not my fault, and that I had asked for a transit visa but as I could not read Arabic, how would I know I had been given an entry visa.

I was delayed a few hours but finally I was allowed to cross.

I'm on the Kuwait side now and have done the paperwork thing and am told I must wait to be convoyed over the dessert to Kuwait City.

I wait all afternoon, it is very hot and I am making regular visits to a stall where an industrious young man of about fifteen years of age is selling water and coke from a large fridge which is hooked up to a generator. He spoke quite good English and we chatted for a while.

I share a brew with a couple of Arab drivers and retire for the night.

The next morning there are still not enough vehicles to form a convoy and I am fed up of waiting. I go to buy some water and get a coke from my young Arab friend and he insists on selling me a bottle of Vimto cordial, declaring it to be a "very good drink"

I'm not for waiting any longer and ask the young man which way to Kuwait City, he shades his eyes with one hand and with the other, points to the desert and proudly says, "this way"

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## **Kuwait City**

I'm parked up in a customs clearing compound and I am warned that there is a long delay.

I am not allowed to wait with the lorry, I must report to my agent in Kuwait City every morning to check if my load had been cleared for onward delivery.

I have to check in to a hotel, The Bristol is where most western drivers stay; this is going to seriously eat in to my meagre financial resources.

I phone Kathy to let her know the situation and she tells me she is short of money as she had not been sent money as was agreed.

I explained earlier the long drawn out process of booking, making and receiving international phone calls in those days, well I did eventually get money to Kathy but it took a few days.

I was young and desperate for adventure, but I should have made better provision for my family, all was well in the end, but I will not elaborate on this memory as I am not exactly proud of myself, sorry Kathy!

I stay in The Bristol for a few days then I tell the agent I will go and wait with the lorry and he will have to come to me. The agent tells me that the customs officials won't let me stay in the compound, but I decide to take my chances and make my way there.

I made incredibly good time getting to Kuwait but then had to wait almost two weeks to clear customs, this meant my entry/exit visa for Kuwait had expired; also I have to get a transit visa for Saudi, I would have to go to the British Consulate to obtain two letters of introduction, one to the Saudi Embassy in Kuwait, and one to the Kuwait office responsible for issuing visa's, I can't remember properly but it must have been a civil service building of some sort.

I am very lucky to have been accompanied by a very efficient and long suffering guardian angel during my globetrotting; he/she has guided me through what sometimes appeared to be impossible situations, it was as if all I had to do was put one foot in front of the other and all would be well.

I arrive at Kuwait Oil Company, Kuwait City, Kuwait and am escorted to a huge compound out in the desert, where just about as far as you could see in any direction was all manner of equipment; Land Rovers, cranes, diggers, bulldozers, and just about anything you could think of.

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I was marshalled to an open area within the compound where the portable toilets were offloaded - well shoved off the side of the trailer actually!

I had gone to all that trouble to provide these people with privies, and they would not be using them as they were equipped with western sit on seats, and the locals would only use the footprint type.

Homeward bound, but first I fill up the road tank (100 gallons) and belly tank (300 gallons) with diesel at three pence per gallon, this will get me two thirds the way home and I planned to re-load in Austria which would give me enough money to get home.

I make good time through Saudi, Jordan and in to Syria, you have to keep going in this heat, if you stop even for a short time it becomes unbearable.

I'm travelling north about half way between Damascus and Homs when there is suddenly a drop in power from the engine, and a cloud of white smoke coming from the back of the cab. My heart sinks as I instantly recognise the symptoms of a broken injector pipe.

I am no stranger to broken injector pipes; sometimes the vibration of the engine causes the pipe to snap, which then sprays diesel all over the engine compartment including the exhaust, resulting in the aforementioned white smoke.

I press on to Homs on seven cylinders and find a garage where a very nice man gas welded the offending item, no mean feat as the hole that carries the fuel through the core of the pipe is barely visible to the naked eye, but remember I told you earlier how resourceful people had to be at that time, in that part of the world.

I re-fit the pipe and get on my way having only lost a couple of hours.

I'm at the border between Syria and Turkey, still on the Syrian side when I am approached by a man who looked to be in his early twenties, with long but tidy hair and a full beard.

He asks me if I will take him and his two friends as far as the Tarsus Mountains, where they are to do a spot of climbing; I decline and watch him as he retires to the table outside a cafe where his friends are waiting.

I am conscious that mine is the only western lorry in the queue waiting to cross the border, and feel a little mean by refusing to give these young people (two boys and a girl) a lift, but I want to get home and don't need to be encumbered by passengers, besides the job is dangerous enough without inviting strangers along.

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I watch the three mountaineers as they discuss their next tactic, and am not at all surprised to see the same young man walking towards my lorry once again.

I listen patiently, after all there was not much else to do and I haven't had much conversation of late. He explains that they are student teachers from Poland and have been travelling the region as part of their course, he shows me their passports and some documents he claimed legitimised his words, but I remained unimpressed and he once again returned to his disappointed friends.

At last, it is my turn to get the stamp of approval from passport control and as I walk back to my lorry I glance over to where the three lost souls were sitting and gestured to them to join me.

I must say I hit it off straight away with Jersey, who had been the negotiator of the three, he spoke good English, the other two were a couple, they had very little English but were nevertheless friendly.

I was I have to say very glad of the company and that afternoon we were travelling up the Mediterranean coast and it was so nice that we decided to stop and go for a swim.

I've never been the strongest swimmer, but the Med in that area is so buoyant that it flatters even the most ordinary.

We were having a high old time, we found an old ball and were busy throwing it to each other whilst bobbing around in the warm water, when I noticed a man dressed in some kind of uniform unfamiliar to me (I'd seen a few by now) and he was waving his arms around, one of which had a rifle attached to the end, we swam ashore and approached the man who repeated just one word "SHARK"

We reached Tarsus that evening and I said goodbye to my new friends.

I had exchanged postal details with Jersey and we wrote for a couple of years, but then lost touch, he was a student teacher at the time and is probably retired now.

The roads between Adana, Ankara and Istanbul were, in those days not the best, but traffic was relatively heavy, mostly Turkish "Tonka's" (these were three axle rigid lorries which would usually be grossly overloaded and travelled painfully slow) at the opposite end of the spectrum were the inter-city coaches which would always be travelling far too fast, and would risk all to overtake. Make no mistake, if one of these buses is overtaking you, or heading straight for you whilst overtaking, give way because he certainly won't.

I heard that the drivers of these buses, who dressed like airline pilots, were on strict schedules and if they were late did not get paid.

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I was crossing the Tarsus Mountain area when one of these buses closed up behind me, he was continually flashing his lights and blowing his horn, but the road was narrow and bendy and there was nowhere for me to pull over and let him overtake, so I went as fast as I could until I found a place to let him go by.

I slowed, pulled over and let him pass, but as soon as he had he jammed on the anchors and fifteen or twenty people got down from the bus and started towards me waving their fists.

I had done nothing at all to antagonise these people, in fact quite the reverse, having seen the dangerous overtaking manoeuvres these drivers would attempt, I wanted to be rid of this pursuer as swiftly as possible.

I certainly didn't like the look of the approaching crowd, but what do I do? if I set off, pass the bus and make my escape he'll be chasing me all the way to Ankara, on the other hand, I wasn't about to wait and see what this mob had planned for me, so I put Maggie in gear and slowly moved forward, immediately the pack turned and ran for the bus.

I stopped as the re-loaded bus sped off. Luckily for me the thought of being stuck behind my lorry again, must have outweighed the angry mobs lust for revenge.

I decided to stay where I was for a while and make a brew.

I make good time to Ankara and on to Istanbul where I again stop at the Mocamp to freshen up, having eaten a meal whilst sat at a table for the first time in a long time, I was walking back to where my lorry was parked when I saw a scruffy looking individual leaning against the cab.

Istanbul was on the "Hippy Trail" and this guy was on his way back to the UK from India to get his teeth fixed.

I quite enjoyed the company of my Polish student wanderers, but they were only with me for a day, this guy was a proper minger, I mean he stunk, and if I said yes to his request for a lift to England, he would be my constant companion for a week or so - not likely!

I pass through the border at Kapicule with very little delay, and on the Bulgarian side met a very nice Danish guy called Gunnar, we travelled together for a while and stopped at a roadside café for something to eat, this was a big mistake as within a couple of hours I started to feel unwell. I was ahead of Gunnar when my condition became so bad that I had to stop.

Gunnar offered to stay with me but I preferred to be alone and try and get some sleep.

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That night I felt so ill, it was awful, but then the cause of my distress made its escape via both ends and I immediately started to recover.

Gunnar had told me that he intended to spend a couple of days at The National in Belgrade so I decided to drop in on him and was only a couple of hours away when the repaired injector pipe snapped again. I limped the rest of the way to Belgrade, removed the offending part and set off to find another nice man.

Maggie now fully recovered and I'm on my way having spent the evening enjoying a drink and blather with Gunnar.

I'm struggling to remember anything about the rest of the trip home that might interest the reader, everything went according to plan, apart from a dodgy starter motor which let me down a couple of times and I had to get a tow start.

It was lovely to get home, Kathy was considerably larger than when I last saw her and I decided that I was going to be around when David arrived, so I did some UK work for Harry Norton where I had a very bad accident, the legacy of which I still carry with me.

David is a very new baby when I set off yet again on my travels, as ever Kathy dutifully waves me on my way.

I had been driving for a few companies on a casual basis since David was born in January '78, it was hard work, I seemed to be working all hours of the day and night, but the money was coming in and I had no shortage of offers of work.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to do at the time, in fact I even toyed with the idea of getting back in to the double glazing business that I had flirted with briefly in 1974 when I met my good friend Eddie, but my lust for travel and adventure was driving me, and when Daniela from Feblands phoned me and asked me to go to Italy how could I refuse.

I have been very lucky so far, I have been able to pursue my ambition and make good money at the same time, in fact for the next two years working for Tony Febland I am going to earn some very good money indeed.

I was well paid and driving the best vehicles available, Scania, DAF and Volvo, and I was getting home every other weekend, in no time at all we had moved to a nicer house and Kathy was busy bringing up our two beautiful children and making a lovely home for us all, life was hard but good.

I'm not sure how this is going to pan out as it's not like the two M/E trips which had a start, middle and end, it was mostly a mad dash from Blackpool to Novara and back, any road up, here goes.

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I was paid mostly by the mile, hence the urgency, although I never took liberties with safety, no, I had seen too many drivers come to serious grief for that.

I would usually set off from Blackpool loaded with groupage (this is when the trailer is loaded to its capacity and sometimes beyond with various goods, and taken to a distribution centre for division and onward delivery) and take it to the Feblands depot in Novara, which is about 25 miles this side of Milan, where I would drop the trailer and hook up to another destined for Blackpool, but I would only take it back to the port, usually Boulogne or Calais where a trailer would be waiting for me to take once again to Novara and then I would usually return with a trailer loaded for delivery in the UK.

I remember one time I was on my way home, and so looking forward to seeing Kathy and the kids, but when I arrived at the freight office at Boulogne I found that there was a message for me to ring the office in Blackpool.

I was not to go home after all, but instead I was to drop my trailer which would be shipped unaccompanied, and travel solo (tractor unit only) to Dunkirk, where a Febland Kangaroo trailer had been refused rail passage as it was loaded with hazardous chemicals, so I would have to take it to Novara by road.

I don't think it still exists, but in those days there was a rail service across Europe that carried road going semi-trailers which were specially designed for the job, the tops of the trailers were rounded to enable them to pass through the tunnels and they had fittings for loading and securing to the carriage, the service was named Kangaroo.

I hooked up to the trailer early evening that same day and set off to Italy.

I immediately noticed that the trailer was very heavy, not that it would bother the big DAF that I had adopted, but as I had chemicals on board I could not use the Mont Blanc Tunnel so I had a choice, either down to the south of France and cross in to Italy at Ventimiglia, then climb up from Genova to Milan, or over Mont Cenis, which is a mountain pass between Modane in France and Turin in Italy.

Mont Cenis is a beautiful place, the road over it is a series of hairpin bends snaking its way up the French side, then you drop down in to a basin where there is a magnificent lake which you skirt round then climb out of the dip and start the descent in to Italy.

I knew the big DAF would have no trouble pulling the heavy trailer up the steep inclines of the French side, but the weight of the vehicle would be a real test while negotiating the tricky extremely tight bends that drop you down in to Italy.

If I decide to go via the south of France it will take me a day longer or possibly more, so I head for Mont Cenis.

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I've been hooked up to this trailer for over six hundred miles, so you can imagine my surprise when at the first hairpin bend on the approach to Mont Cenis it decided to part company with the tractor unit.

I was taking it very easy indeed on this tight bend when to my horror I saw in my mirrors the trailer sliding away backwards, I stood on the anchors as it dropped off the back of the tractor and crashed to it's knees (landing legs), the whole outfit coming to a halt just in time to save air lines from breaking.

Three air lines, yellow = service, blue = auxiliary and red = emergency deliver power from the tractor unit to the brakes on the trailer.

Satisfied that the vehicle is secured, I jump out and apply the mechanically operated trailer brake.

I must admit this situation had me scratching my head a little. I checked everything, the fifth wheel mechanism appeared to be intact apart from the release handle that was a little bit bent and the kingpin on the trailer was just fine, yet something must be wrong, after all I had covered over six hundred miles pulling this trailer with no problem, and suddenly this happens, then I notice that the fifth wheel release handle safety clip was missing.

I came to the conclusion that whilst negotiating the steeply inclined hairpin bend, something on the trailer had got caught on the fifth wheel release handle dragging it out.

So much for the safety clip!

I must say I always thought these safety clips, which were universal were a bit flimsy considering the job they were designed to do!

It was late evening and I am not much of an obstacle to traffic which was very light anyway, so I get camped down for the night.

The next morning I'm up with the sparrows and searching the woods for some good solid timbers. I had a ten ton bottle jack and my plan was to lift the front of the trailer, pack the timbers under and repeat the operation until I could get the tractor under.

I mentioned the trailer was heavy; well my jack was just not going to be powerful enough so I'll have to get help, but it's early and traffic is light and I am hungry, so I get a lift to the top of the mountain where I know there is a café.

I went over Mont Cenis three years ago whilst on a driving holiday with my wife, I can't stress enough the beauty of that area, it is literally breathtaking, heavies are no

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longer allowed to use this route, which is probably the reason why the café is closed down, it made me feel sad.

I had a slap up breakfast and cadged a lift back down to the lorry with a guy who was on his way back from Istanbul and had with him a fifteen ton bottle jack.

With my ten ton jack and his fifteen tonner and plenty of timber we soon had the front end of the trailer high enough to just about get the run up ramps of the big DAF under.

I did say this trailer was heavy laden, well it was so heavy the action of jacking up the front, rather than lifting it, the trailer chassis was actually bending under the weight, when I say bending I should explain that there is a certain amount of flexibility designed in to the chassis.

I position the tractor so that the run up ramps are just nudging under the front of the trailer and get out to have a look.

I have to be careful because the camber of the road is quite severe. If I approach too slowly there is a danger the trailer will slide off the side of the tractor before the fifth wheel grabs the kingpin.

I started to reverse under the trailer and the big DAF sat down on its back axle, lifted the juggernaut and the fifth wheel grabbed the kingpin first time.

My friend and I congratulate each other, clear up and go our separate ways.

I completed the journey to Via Bovio, Novara with no further problems, and I drove the combination of the DAF and FFM7 - which was the fleet number of the trailer - many more times with no problems.

I met some good friends while I was doing that job, Arthur Gardener, Terry Dixon, Anthony Clayton Smyth, Georgio, Tony Febland, Daniela and of course my old mate Gary Richardson with whom I am still in regular contact.

Gary stayed in the transport game and went on to build a successful haulage business of his own.

I must have driven millions of miles in my career, met some really nice people and seen some amazing places, and I'm sure if I put my mind to it I could find something more to write about and maybe I will, but for now I leave you with this thought:

The world belongs to the risk takers, but calculate the risks you take very carefully and consider the effect your actions will have on others; always try to be strong but keep in mind it's easy to be strong, mean and selfish but more satisfying to be strong, kind and generous. I learnt this from a wonderful person to whom strength,

A decorative border of palm trees surrounds the page. The trees are arranged in a repeating pattern along the top, bottom, and sides. The top border is a single row of trees. The side borders are vertical columns of trees. The bottom border is a single row of trees.

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generosity, kindness, loyalty and forgiveness comes naturally, and to whom I humbly dedicate these memories, Katherine Eileen Boyle-McVey