

## Letter from Limpopo (04)...

from John Edmonds

Sunday 17 April 2011



Halfway! Week Three started with a surge of deliveries, timber for two classrooms from Selati, bolts for connections, together with a revised programme to rationalise the design for speedier truss and column fabrication. The workshop and patio became a hive of activity, marking out, drilling, counter-boring, bolting and trimming the compound timber beams.

Concrete supply difficulties became acute when the regional batching plant at Tzaneen suffered a water supply failure, which further delayed the delivery of concrete until Wednesday evening, with the contractor and his team working through the night to lay and power-float the first classroom slab. Water supply difficulties in Tzaneen also coincided with the sudden loss of water pressure in Calais village, leading to the site water storage tank soon being drained. Convoys of villagers pushing wheelbarrows filled with a myriad of plastic water containers stretched to the local river, as they seemed used to this erratic mains supply. We also learned the generic reply to this and many other unexpected situations: *'TIA - This Is Africa!'*

Production of trusses through our field workshop was impressive, with a growing stack of measured, assembled, jointed and trimmed structural assemblies awaiting their final components, the columns. The generator supplying our own electricity struggled to keep pace with the combined loadings from the bench saw, power drills and angle grinders, there not being enough spare capacity to even run Radio Jacaranda FM.

The imminent arrival of the Phase 2 team on site for lunch on 14 April led to the key objective for the week, the erection of the first full truss. This involved the fabrication of a pair of prototype timber box-section columns, bolted directly to one of the compound lattice beams to complete the assembly on the ground.

A full Phase 1 reception committee, including the 'Chief' from the village, were able to witness their innocent colleagues undertake the ritual dance of acceptance to the site before sharing the ropes to haul the first truss into the air. Hard-hats were thrown aloft graduation-style, which was mirrored by the local children watching from the site entrance throwing their shoes in the air! A most appropriate conclusion to the first three weeks on site, but also the beginning of the weekend handover celebrations between the two teams.

A barbeque (*braai*) had been planned for the sunny Saturday afternoon and evening at a private game lodge about 10km from Tzaneen. A fleet of minibus taxis transported the full Project Limpopo team of sixty undergraduate and postgraduate students to Mowana, to be greeted by the opportunity to explore the stockaded braai area and safari lodges leading to a secluded lakeside. Ibex, sable, zebras and ostrich were spotted, but the giraffes and more timid animals kept well out of view. Within the stockade, the wood fires had been lit for cooking, individual food choices introduced to the flames and rapidly consumed at this idyllic location. As darkness fell, presentation of Awards to the Phase 1 team commenced. Every team member received a Certificate in recognition of their own specific outstanding contribution, all light-hearted, but in the best possible taste! The finale for the evening was the arrival of an inquisitive, but friendly, young hippo who posed for a memorable photo opportunity outside the stockade.

With the Phase 1 team sadly due to depart on Monday morning, and Phase 2 fresh and ready to get to grips with the challenging task of completing at least two classrooms over the next three weeks, much remains to be done. The motto for the week? '*JDI –Just do it!*'

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