Chapter I

Introduction

In writing this account my aim is to introduce and describe as best I can anecdotally – I stress anecdotally - my involvement in third-world development; as I knew it and lived it through long and short term missions made overseas. I’ve tried my best to capture issues and topics on a wide canvas; they cover my selective assessments of the good, the amusing as well as occasionally some negative impressions – not so many.

I’m the first to admit that in visits to countries of the developing world the selection has been random; being based on opportunities almost always out of my control and to a somewhat capricious timing. Perhaps I sound somewhat like Homer’s Ulysses but such was generally the case. Then again my treatment of the countries covered by a variety of missions is also somewhat capricious: depending on time spent familiarising myself with individual countries and their politics and support for communities; whether they appealed or even repelled me; some special qualities to be found there especially in relation to education issues; or a mixture of all three. It’s also quite possible the random selection I followed would not be typical of the priority countries supported by the various development agencies to which I was attached from time to time.

The paths in professional life I chose were unusual. I suppose the happy result was that they have led to experiences of exceptional and colourful varieties. These are in contrast to the once more likely possibility of a sedentary - possibly staid - professional life at home. I’m well aware however that there could have been trade-offs between both these alternatives. Experience also tells us that while we may like to think we are fully in charge of our destinies - we seldom are. Perhaps it’s better so.

Most of my work in development has been for the European Commission on behalf of the European Community/Union. In writing of my missions abroad to the outside world I welcomed and shared a common European nationality and based on a morality determined by European and international norms. That outside world is changing so quickly. I’ve noted that in preparing the index I’ve referred to pre-revolution and post-conflict missions on several occasions. Many of my observations are already overtaken by international ground-breaking events such as the Arab Spring of 2011.

Throughout my career in overseas development the EU has represented the exercise of ‘soft’ power related to aid; involving the building up of trading relationships which whether not always altruistic – did certainly stand in what was to me a positive position when contrasted with ‘hard’ power of bombers and battleships as exercised by the US or indeed the Soviet Union in their hay days.

I expect in writing this book I’ll occasionally visit my professional/ technical career in detail. I have through my career made many missions to developing countries and written maybe a hundred reports on aspects of individual country’s education development and funding. My intention here is not to dwell on contractual or financial arrangements. Rather it has been to put together a narrative coloured by the novel impressions taken from my missions; the challenges posed, coupled with building bridges to local counterparts, making new friendships, some humour and the like.
In a wider context my time overseas took place in the shadow of the end of the Cold War. Then there were the wars in the Balkans following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bloodshed caused by conviction politicians in the former Yugoslavia. We experienced the obscenities of the Iraq War. Here nearer to home there were the long-running troubles in Northern Ireland as well as revelations and the cover-ups regarding clerical paedophiles in Irish state institutions. Another sad, very sad, issue which has overhung most of my international life has been the confrontations between Israel acting at times as a surrogate for the United States and at other times at its own behest as it confronts the Arab world. I have some admiration for Israeli democracy within its borders but little or none for its treatment of the Palestinians.

Some accounts of missions I made will refer to countries I only had the opportunity to visit on perhaps one occasion: where I was only passing through so to speak. But for a number such as Pakistan (and my travels through India), Nepal, Egypt, Cambodia, Vietnam or Tanzania I made numerous missions or was a long term resident. My technical reports based on the findings identified by these missions were written to bring about decisions – usually on release of funds for development purposes and are in a cool and dispassionate format – or so I hope they will be deemed to have been. They’re somewhere logged on my computer or in some developmental institution such as EuropeAid in Brussels. Occasionally I have referred to or borrowed short accounts from magazines or articles over the years, especially those from Wikipedia which I have found to be most useful. I hope I have acknowledged them. Most of the photographs with the exception of several from Pakistan and one or two other countries are my own or I have collected them over some thirty years. Where I can I have tried to attribute the sources of other photographs included. I hope no offence will be caused arising from any unintended borrowings; either of texts or photographs.

There have been unimaginable advances from the days of my youth with the advent of other new technologies such as the computer, the web and especially the mobile phone but also the new motorways, car ferries and the budget airlines and the role of television in the way we view our world. Each of these phenomena has had a profound effect on the way our lives have evolved and been lived through the latter part of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty first.

The advance of technology especially communications technology even over my relatively short career has been outstanding and can be expected to continue. Take one instance: on a Friday afternoon in March 2009 I was sitting in my hotel room in Dhaka, Bangladesh, listening to a familiar Irish Television (RTE) ‘Drive Time’ afternoon programme being streamed over the web to my laptop. On most recent missions I have been accustomed to speaking/reporting to the Mission HQs over VOIP (Skype) at no cost. In Vietnam in the morning we often engaged with the home-going HQ staff located in the World Bank on Conference Call. I admit to using voice recognition software but with mixed results.
A background briefing

I cite the following brief background as an example of how I as an individual from simple beginnings and with little forethought put my first steps on a ladder which ultimately led to a life working overseas as a development consultant.

The year I finished school I elected to study at the Nautical College then situated beside my subsequent yacht club, the DMYC, at the beginning of the West Pier in Dun Laoghaire. I was seventeen when I enrolled sometime in September. I suppose I looked forward with a certain amount of enthusiasm to joining a merchant ship of the Irish Shipping Company.

The S.S. Irish Elm, or the “Elm”, was a tramp steamer operating between Irish and U.K. ports and the main East Coast cities of North America. I spent a little over a year at sea. From difficult beginnings I negotiated a peaceful (mainly) integration into the company of the other three cadet – apprentices. We were all four of us young, raw, thrown together, lonely and we very naturally missed feminine company at times. I learned some important lessons then and which I’ve continued to adhere to all my life. One of them is that while it’s important to have principles it’s best to minimise the amount of such baggage one carries. Be friendly with everyone - and helpful - until you see that such trust is not being reciprocated. Try to see both sides to every story.

Finishing school as early as I did meant that I had managed to have the experience of being at sea and then commencing quantity surveying studies at the same age as the vast majority of students who were now enrolling but who had taken a more desultory progress through their studies. It probably counted for some difference.

I started as a quantity surveying student in the then College of Technology on the north side of the River Liffey, sometime in September 1961. At that time Bolton Street was a constituent college of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), which included three colleges: each of which had evolved over the previous years from being trade colleges teaching arts and skills such as the building and printing, hospitality and electrical and engineering trades. Quantity Surveying had been identified as a priority area and was established some few years before my arrival.

Thus, in a relatively small student environment of the time there were the building trades’ courses covering all aspects of construction including mechanical and electrical work. At a higher level there were professional courses in architecture, land, quantity and valuation surveying and mechanical and electrical engineering. Amongst the building professions it was axiomatic that like the Bostonian Cabots – the architects spoke directly to God. Quantity surveying was somewhat lower in the building hierarchy. It originally derived from the contractors who measured and priced the construction requirements of 18th and 19th century clients. It was and continues to a significant degree to be unknown outside the U.K. and Ireland for small-scale construction work. Under the EC regulations for the establishment of a common European Union-wide tendering procedure it has become the norm as it has for major construction in the developing world. In later years I was to become familiar with both.

In my second year I was elected as the President of the Senior Students’ Council to represent the professional students in the college. On completing the course I joined the practice of Desmond MacGreevy and Partners located in Dublin’s Fitzwilliam Square about 1961.
After several years in about 1969 as I began to chase post-graduate opportunities abroad my senior partner, Desmond MacGreevy, assured me that if I could find a university where I could study for a Masters in an area related to quantity surveying or building economics his practice would pay my salary and the fees involved. He required in return that I should make an aspect of quantity surveying and construction management as the basis of my study and that on graduating I would return and work in the practice for a minimum of five years. I was very happy to take up this unusual and exceedingly generous offer and of course I made exhaustive enquiries and was selected to study at Bath University. I was to carry out research for an MSc under John Southwell, the Research Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors attached to the School of Architecture which was located initially in a majestic Vanbrugh mansion at Kings Weston on the north bank of the River Avon between Bristol and Avonmouth. Subsequently, it would relocate to the new campus in Bath during the second year of my studies.

The initial objectives would be to establish good working relations with a representative sampling of developments being undertaken across the UK in the New Town Corporations then under construction. In parallel, I would attempt to learn of the policies and strategies being undertaken by the respective English, Scottish and Welsh Industrial Estates Corporations and by their Northern Ireland counterpart. Finally, I should also seek the cooperation of the Industrial Development Authority in the Republic. My research would be based on an analysis of the policies and strategies being followed as part of a strategy for regional development. To ensure adequate data to work on and write up – I would make a comparison between the technical contractual documentation made available to me.

Armed with the MSc from Bath University I returned to Bolton Street as a part-time lecturer with the support of Desmond MacGreevy to lecture in cost planning and cost control to final (fourth year) construction economics/quantity surveying students from 1971 to 1976. I very much enjoyed lecturing and helping students. I’m always reminded of the German expression “Mit Kindern – bleibt Mann jung”. So it was to be¹. I am very conscious that I derived a great deal from Bolton Street and my time there. In some small way I felt I was doing something to return the opportunities I had benefitted from. Irrespective of any contribution I may have made however small I’m happy that over the longer-term the DIT, which is now the largest third level institution in the country, has been lobbying for recognition as a university. Already it awards PhD degrees. Good luck to it. It will have come a long way.

Ironically being a quantity surveyor and with a post graduate MSc degree covering over five years of higher education meant that I would be acknowledged in the new environment of the European Union as a professional where my class mates who followed the normal system with less than five years of study were not. It rendered me eligible for international appointments. Nowadays, everyone has a PhD. Then a humble MSc sufficed.

¹ I’m constantly amazed at how small the world apparently is. I quote just my son Garrett’s experience when he was working in Vancouver, Canada. He was in some pub or other - probably one with Irish associations - when someone asked him whether he was any relation to a Liam Owens, who had lectured in quantity surveying in the DIT, Bolton Street College many years before? It was a former student of mine.
The beginnings of overseas travel and then time spent in Germany and in pre-revolution Iran

On my arrival back in Dublin I was treated exceptionally well from the professional point of view. I became directly involved in the larger projects undertaken by the practice. I spent a short time on one project in London. Then I became the management surveyor for an office development being built on the Avenue Louise in Brussels – situated directly opposite a hotel building, then known as the Hotel McDonald. While subsequently based in Brussels I have on occasion strolled down to check whether it was still standing. To my relief it is.

Another project was with EUROSTAT in Luxembourg. For a year or so I was the Irish representative for the Purchasing Power Parity Study in relation to the construction sector. The work entailed a standard pricing of a range of construction goods and services by persons directly involved in the construction industry of the respective countries and the meetings were called to resolve substantial differences in costs and pricing of goods and services in the various member states.

Thus, between working on a variety of interesting projects coupled with lecturing in Bolton Street I suppose I was beginning to make a small name for myself in the construction confraternity. Coincidentally, my senior partner and mentor, Desmond MacGreevy used to like to dare me to expand myself professionally. One time he was approached by the governmental agency, the Irish Export Board to recommend someone to make a presentation on construction management at the First Symposium of Building and Reconstruction in Cairo - an event being held to secure funding for refurbishing the huge damage done to Egyptian infrastructure as a result of the earlier Egyptian-Israeli conflict. He challenged me with it and I thought it was a great opportunity. Shortly afterwards I found myself and my notes on board a plane bound for Cairo. It was a very grand occasion. I had to report on the people I had met and on possibilities for Irish construction firms in Egypt.

The Export Board appeared to like the way I had carried myself and would come up with proposals for involving me from time to time. A day arrived when I was taken for lunch to the prestigious Shelbourne Hotel with Des McGreevy and an official from the Board. He made a proposal to Des that the Board would set me up attached to its offices in Düsseldorf in Germany for a period of two years. During that time it would pay half my salary. I would work fulltime to promote the services of McGreevy and Partners as quantity surveyors with the major international German, Dutch and other construction firms operating especially in the Middle East and Africa.

Again I was most grateful to be afforded such an interesting and challenging role. I considered myself extremely lucky. Over a number of years I had been attending German language courses at the Goethe Institute in Dublin. I suppose that also helped.

We all shook hands and bade farewell after the lunch. Standing in front of the Shelbourne Hotel I was aware then that this discussion with its outcome was going to have major implications for me, my career but also for the family. In the sixties and seventies while the UK, the US and Australia might be acceptable and well-known destinations for young Irish couples there appeared to be much less known about continental Europe and countries such

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2 I wrote a short note on it which I found recently and which I’ve attached amongst the Annexes below.
as Germany. That has all changed enormously since Ireland joined the European Union. In 1976, the family moved to live for two years in Meerbusch-Osterrath; just outside Düsseldorf in then West Germany.

![Image](image.png)

1977: My managers and friends to whom I owe much. From left: Tony Cooney, the manager of CTT Dusseldorf, H.E. Robin Fogarty Irish Ambassador to Germany, Des MacGreevy, my senior partner, and myself.

I commenced marketing in countries adjacent to my Düsseldorf base. Then gradually I began to expand my activities with visits to companies across Germany. I set up itineraries through Belgium especially with EC contacts in Brussels, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria. My break came when I obtained an appointment with a large Dutch firm specialising as a consortium leader in port construction worldwide.

![Image](image.png)

The timing was fortuitous. The Dutch company had just signed a contract for the technical management of a US$ 500 million contract with the Port and Shipping Organisation of Iran. The contractors were Italian and had a British firm of quantity surveyors retained on site to formulate claims. The Dutch were looking for a firm such as ours; given our firm was non-British I remember was seen to be something of a bonus. There had been a tendency, or so it was inferred to me, for Brits working abroad to operate in cabals and to keep non British firms and individuals at arm’s length. I’ve found it helpful to be English mother-tongue but non-English. Irish are not perceived internationally to be English.
The Dutch consortium wanted to have a contractual and financial matters team mobilised and operational on site as soon as possible. I was the only person they knew so I was to be drafted. Iran opened my eyes to a whole new world. In 1976 the Shah wanted to convert the existing port to a naval base and to construct a new commercial port a few kilometres further up the Gulf. That was our project.

Some issues had already materialised and there was an immediate prospect of the contractor’s claims going to international arbitration. A first item in contention was that the contract had a clause which allowed for mobilisation of staff and resources around the Cape of Good Hope instead of through the Suez Canal due to its unavailability owing to the blockage of the canal following the recent Israeli-Egyptian hostilities. The Suez Canal had since been cleared and mobilisation had taken place through it. This represented a huge potential saving given the size of the project. This saving would have to be negotiated. Another issue related to the delayed handover of the site. There had been corruption and lives had been lost as a result. A third issue, to illustrate the magnitude of the civil engineering issues involved, concerned the levelling of a local mountain and the use of the material as armour stone for lining the kilometres of the port breakwaters. The wrong mountain had been selected by the contractors. The stone was not up to the standard required by the contract specification.

Tehran is a sprawling city at the foot of the Tochal mountain range with an immense network of highways unparalleled in Western Asia. The city is famous for its numerous resorts on the Alborz slopes, large museums, art centres and palace complexes. It is the largest city in the Middle East and one of the most densely populated in the world. Most Iranian industries are headquartered in Tehran, including the manufacturing of automobiles, electrical equipment,
military weaponry, textiles, sugar, cement, and chemical products. Pollution is a major problem.

While Iran is the main bastion of Shia Islam the city as would be normal in similar Middle East countries traditionally contained a range of various religious minorities. It had many historic mosques, churches, synagogues and even some Zoroastrian fire temples. Then overall the contemporary Tehran is a modern city featuring many tall structures and infrastructures. I’m informed that internationally Tehran is the least expensive capital in the world and only the second least expensive city globally after Karachi. It wouldn’t ever be my first choice as a holiday destination – nor indeed would Karachi!

Teheran was going through an interesting if somewhat ominous phase. At parties with alcohol in the various hotels we met various expatriates: some westerners with their Iranian boyfriends and some who were returned Iranian graduates from the top US universities. In conversation I found the latter especially to be frustrated and highly critical of the regime in charge. There were a number of European girls based in Teheran and working with Iran Air. Women drove and many had adopted Western lifestyles. Everywhere there were Hillman Hunter cars where the older models’ assemblage had been transferred from the UK – just like the Morris Oxfords across India. On the other hand there were signs of the military everywhere with their wide uniform hats as well as uniformed US officers who moved around with a high profile.

In the streets there was a clear demarcation between the traditionalists and the ‘new wave’ supportive of western culture. I occasionally saw hate in the locals’ eyes as they witnessed things which to them must have been outrageously un-Islamic. There was a great deal of poverty. There was animosity against the Brits as well as against the Americans. Memories are long in that part of the world and in the fifties the British apparently had had a major role in toppling the nationalist and anti-imperialist Prime Minister, Dr Mossadeq.

At night in Tehran in the summer it was hot and I remember I had to sleep with the windows open and behind the timber grills. I was much taken aback to have no protection in a
bedroom overlooking an un-emptied swimming pool swarming with mosquitoes in the company’s rest house in the city. I was up all night being eaten alive and swishing the little devils against the ceiling and daubing the expensive wallpaper in marks of my own blood. On weekends while I was in the city I visited the local bazaars. We still have here at home romantic Iranian pictures of couples embracing - which would not now be tolerated - as well as the highly intricate prayer mats.

Des MacGreevy and I arrived in Teheran sometime in Mid-1977. The city perched up about four thousand feet above sea level made a big impression. Above us was even more mountain and on the other side there was the oil rich Caspian Sea. After Des left I stayed on; on my own. I transferred to the site but still I travelled frequently between the site and the company offices in Teheran. From Bandar Abbas I regularly took the flight that was shot down years after the revolution with great loss of life by US naval forces patrolling the area.

I’m estimating it was mid 1977 because an old colleague arrived in the house just before Christmas (2007) with a card and an Iranian coin attached to commemorate the mobilisation of the whole MacGreevy contingent. I think this colleague remained in Iran through the revolution and stayed between six and eight years under the Ayatollah’s regime. He looks back as I do on the Iranian people as intelligent, the most sophisticated in the Middle East and warm and generous. Our arrival was only months or maybe a year before the Khomeini Revolution took place.

When we set up camp there Bandar Abbas was still being used by the Shah’s police as an internment camp for disaffected suspects and intellectuals who had not been convicted of anything sufficiently serious to require more extreme penalties. As I drove between the site and the old town I often picked up internees hitching lifts. One spoke good English and explained his situation but also confided that he could still bribe the guards to allow him get back occasionally to Teheran to meet his family. There was certainly bribery or ‘back shish’ as the locals called it.

The construction site ran along the seashore for about ten kilometres and extended by about 5 kilometres inland. Then there were a couple of adjacent mountains. My colleagues and I as site staff were warned not to be abroad unprotected. This dangerous situation arose through compulsory acquisition of the construction site by some of the Shah’s relations in the absence of indemnifying the local peasants and date palm tree cultivators and as should have occurred prior to the commencement of the huge site clearance. The locals were not given either notice or any assurances of compensation by the authorities and somewhat understandably turned out and stoned the Italian bulldozer crews. The Italians in turn responded with revolvers and stilettos – and several deaths. Such a situation didn’t make either for cost savings or indeed an easy life!
Unfortunately some of this bribery continued after the revolution when it appears to have become institutionalised. I say this advisedly. In the UN Club in Pakistan years later I met a middle aged Iranian civil rights lawyer and her two very attractive daughters. She shocked us with stories she cited of Ayatollahs who ran the divorce courts and who demanded to sleep with the women seeking divorces - as a pre-condition for granting them. Ultimately, I am sure the good sense of the majority of the Iranian people will enable the state to pull through but following Iranian instead of the dominant western norms and precedents. Perhaps on the basis of the last couple of decades experience this can only be termed a naïve pacifist agenda. But then maybe it is the only way the present radicalisation of Islam will be confined to those irreconcilably hostile and remote parts of Afghanistan and North West Pakistan.

Bandar Abbas was a town strategically situated on the Straits of Hormuz. Offshore there were a couple of small islands. At that point the Persian Gulf is very narrow and could be blocked by sinking four or five tankers across the narrows – something which appeared always to come up and be on everyone’s mind. A feature of life there were the very frequent earthquakes. The port is situated where the African and Asian tectonic plates meet. One quickly got used to them. One of the islands had originally been garrisoned by the Portuguese who recognised the strategic advantage of its location. So I’m sure did Sinbad the Sailor and many more. There’s little that is new – just the conquerors change!

In the Portuguese fort there was an ancient well and a headstone supported on round half circular Roman arches with rusted old cannons strewn about. It was said that during the First World War a company of British soldiers was stationed on one of them and disappeared. These were hot dry places and the question is whether they died of thirst – or just left. I’d prefer to think it was the latter. On site in Bandar Abbas and in separate bachelor quarters I lived with four Dutch colleagues. The few families there were on site lived well away in seclusion from the bachelors’ housing.
From the first I admired the way my Dutch colleagues got down to fixing up their short wave aerials to receive Dutch language broadcasts from somewhere in the Indian Ocean and to start conversation lessons with the male domestic staff. They were good company but after several weeks we all missed our wives, partners and families.

Perhaps it was because I wasn’t Dutch and because I travelled frequently to Tehran that I was appointed to the Black Peter organising committee to arrange for the Dutch national holiday on 5th December. Perhaps it was charm or maybe a combination of both but I was elected to the committee. So I attended meetings in Dutch family houses and had polite cups of tea passed to me by feminine hands! It was in a way amusing to be quizzed closely by the other men when I returned from such meetings on such matters as individual women’s complexions, or on what they were wearing. I suppose none of us had celibacy as an objective and still were living such unnatural lives. Later as some wives and partners came to visit they must have found us all somewhat amazing - or even questionable – the way we asked for haircuts or attended on them at close quarters and then hung on their every word!

Another feature I noticed was the difficulty of walking on the few footpaths in the town. Iranians are not tall and even I at about 5’10” found I had to duck the low growing branches. It was almost intolerable for my two metre tall Dutch colleagues.

Occasionally we came across men and women in Western dress. These were Bahai people and were western in the way that the women were equal and had no hesitation in joining in, in general conversation. I understand that life was very hard for them after the revolution. I heard that several were executed.
For the women with families on site there was really very little for them to do. There were some shops on the camp but nothing to write home about. Initially there was the beach and the warm sand and the aquamarine sea for them and their children to enjoy and pass the time. They did enjoy it. It all came suddenly to a stop when there was a near fatal accident. One of the children was attacked by a sea snake. That finished the beach as an option. There were several local children. One day at dusk I was queuing up at the supermarket when a small boy thought I was his father and put his hands on my knee just as our sons Dara and Garrett would do. I almost crumbled up with emotion and I cried at the thought of missing them. I’ve known a fair bit of loneliness in my time away. It goes with the international territory and I’ve hated it. Nothing compensates for it.

I was living on camp for at least two long weekends that year. For the Shah’s Birthday a group of us - mainly younger expats - borrowed a Mercedes bus and two jeeps; the latter in case the bus broke down and we needed to be rescued. We headed east across the broken roads in the general direction of Bam and the Afghanistan frontier. Bam was a revelation. There were seven concentric defence walls and the citadel. The whole site was imposing and enormous. But the walls were of mass mud and stone construction and didn’t survive the recent earthquake in 2003 when most of them were levelled.

It was said to have been founded by the Persian Emperor Darius, who was ultimately defeated by Alexander the Great. The ancient citadel of Bam is reported in Wikipedia as probably having a history dating back around 2000 years ago to the Parthian Empire (248 BC–224 AD). The modern Iranian city of Bam surrounds the Bam citadel. Most buildings we visited were built during the much later Safavid dynasty. The city was largely abandoned due to an Afghan invasion in 1722. Subsequently, the city had gradually been re-settled.

The party spent the night in Bam. We stayed in a sleazy, badly maintained, local guesthouse. There was just nowhere else available. There I picked up a slight skin infection as a souvenir and which took a long time to clear. Another picture I have is of several of us wading through the shallow river searching to find a way for the jeeps and the bus through the rocks hidden under water. The bridges had been washed away during winter flooding. How I wish I
had kept the photos I had taken. Maybe they are in the boxes of slides we have from years ago. Maybe it is like the situation when I drove through the high Hindu Kush and Pamir mountains over the Khunjerab Pass from Pakistan into China at fifteen thousand feet and my camera didn’t roll on!

Returning to the life on camp it should be noted that the Dutch living-quarters were far away from the Italian construction camp. Perhaps it was just as well. One day at the weekly site meeting the Resident Engineer announced “there was a stranger in the camp”. Those like me who were new were anxious to find out who this stranger might be. Was it a Russian spy? We had had a clandestine visit by the Soviet ambassador. Although it was hushed up to the Iranian Port and Shipping Authority – nobody had expected such a visit and so no precautions were taken. The Iranian security guards were very anxious and afraid that word might get out to the authorities.

Could it have been the sea snakes or the ubiquitous scorpions? No! It was much more to do with human weakness and almost came to split the thousand odd Italian community living on the site into two armed camps. There was apparently at least one lady who was bored and who had set up herself as a sex worker apparently without the knowledge of her husband/partner. Subsequently she and several of her Italian and Iranian customers came down with a touch of syphilis. As a precaution and as she was afraid if she went to the Italian doctor the whole Italian camp would be up in arms she went to the Dutch doctor instead. However the Dutch doctor’s Iranian secretary passed the information on to another Iranian who spread the word through the Italian camp. There was Hell to pay. We were told that the patients were airlifted to Rome on one plane, the irritated husband with his own problems on another and the discommoded Italian lady entrepreneur left on still a third plane.

Another incident happened in Bandar Abbas. I was travelling up to Teheran and was in the airport about to board when I encountered my senior Dutch Resident Engineer and his stout roly-poly wife. He was supporting her with one hand and holding a dog in a cage in the other. He was a slight small man and I went to help him believing she was sick as so many people often were. As soon as we were seated she moaned for vodka and her husband produced a bottle out of his coat pocket. Things went fairly well until the bottle was emptied. She began to beat him and I had to help restrain her. There wasn’t any prospect of an ambulance at that time of night. We agreed I would carry her and the dog and that the little man would look after the clothes and our small cases.

I held her in front of me with my arm around her waist and the dog in the other hand as we went out through the cockpit door onto the steps. Just then she jolted against me and broke the buckle on my trouser belt. Thus we proceeded to immigration. I fully expected to be knocked or gunned down by the decidedly unfriendly police.
Iran: The ancient citadel of Bam – the city is arguably one of the most impressive sites I’ve ever visited and now sadly destroyed by earthquake. My photograph of the group of us safely arrived under the walls of the magnificent ancient city of Bam since largely levelled by an earthquake in about 2003.

I had one further run-in with the airport police when my visa was out of date. They used the Cyrillic calendar while I thought I was alright with the departure dates according to the Gregorian calendar. A few US dollars of backshish and I was free! Iranian guards can look distinctly unpleasant. Teheran is one of those few airports where I’ve experienced anxiety and always enjoyed some alcoholic refreshment in flight and once I was sure we had departed!

I stayed in Bandar Abbas for a couple of months working on discovering arguments on the various contractual issues and quantifying and costing them. Then the long-term team from Dublin came out and I handed over to them and returned to Düsseldorf and the family. I returned subsequently for a couple of shorter monitoring type missions. I avoided the revolution.

An amusing incident connecting Bandar Abbas with Meerbusch was the visit we had from about a dozen Dutch engineering stagaires from the site and their girlfriends. Before I left I invited them to celebrate my birthday with Daphne and the family. I forgot until we received a note from a couple of them. We arranged one or two bedrooms and prepared a dinner with refreshments. They came and then more and then more came and all on their heavy motorbikes. Daphne gave up and I went into orbit down to the Chinese take-away. We had great fun. They were happy and musical and put down their sleeping bags anywhere and everywhere.

I don’t know how the neighbours took to such a huge number of visitors. There were slight Dutch-German tensions of the nature of “Give me back my mother’s bicycle” nature as many German soldiers had commandeered bicycles as they retreated from the Netherlands at the end of the war. It was all good natured but to our surprise none of our guests had ever visited Germany before. It says a lot about small countries and long memories!
It was about two years or some more following our departure before we returned to Ireland. I found it was difficult to be away on site in Iran and out of the marketing circuit and then to come back to pick up the pieces with continued marketing. Finally, at the request of the partners it was put to me that I could either be fulltime in Iran or return to general practice work at home. I didn’t want to be away from the family. But I was disappointed to have to give up my marketing work in Germany and to return to the practice in Ireland. However I had the satisfaction that I had had some successes. I could see the enormous potential for expanding the practice world-wide. Key people who had followed the progress in establishing the new venture had some opinion of me. In certain construction circles in Ireland I’ll always be associated with Iran. The Irish team of between six and ten persons was performing well. Indeed the project continued right through the Iranian revolution and extended for several years afterwards.

For me the priority as I was nearing thirty six or thirty seven was to broaden out from being a professional technical person and to become inducted into management. So it was only a matter of time before I honourably tendered my resignation, shook hands with my colleagues and partners and moved into the Irish state sector.