



Keith Ronald Mortimer, Karen Burke, Vera Scott-Bloxam, and Hubert Hofer talk to their lawyers after the handing of their verdict at a court in Merauke, Papua province.

Photo: *AFP*

A weekend flight for three days of adventure has landed five Australians in jail, write Harriet Alexander on Thursday Island and Lisa Murray in Jakarta.

It was another languid Saturday lunchtime at the Federal Hotel on Thursday Island, 30 kilometres north of Cape York, when an argument broke out between two friends.

Five locals were about to fly to Merauke in the Indonesian province of Papua for a three-day adventure weekend, a few hundred kilometres and a world away from their island lifestyle.

The pilot, William Scott-Bloxam - known as "Scotty" - and his wife, Vera, owned a charter business and wanted to investigate the potential of the area for fishing tours.

To subsidise the cost, they invited a friend, Hubert Hofer, a professional diver and shipwreck enthusiast who worked on a desalination plant, and Keith Mortimer, a builder who had

renovated their house and who lived on his yacht, the Monte Cristo.

Mortimer brought along another friend, Karen Burke, a receptionist at the Jardine Motel on Thursday Island, and each paid the Scott-Bloxams \$500.

But a week before they set off, an old friend of William Scott-Bloxam's suggested over lunch that the trip may be ill-advised.

Peter Watton had been to Merauke on business in 1999.

"I found the Indonesians to be extremely hostile to our presence there," he said. "I wouldn't go there as an Australian."

But Scott-Bloxam can be prickly about taking advice. "He said there's no problem," Watton recalled. "They had passports. He didn't mention the visas and I just took for granted that they would have got a visa before they went over there."

Watton tells the story cautiously but others remember it differently. The way Bob Slyne, Karen Burke's boyfriend, heard it, Scott-Bloxam was furious. "I've f----- been doing this all my life. Don't tell me I haven't got things organised," he reportedly said. That conversation is still hanging in the air over Timor Strait.

The five flew into Merauke's military base on September 12 and were promptly arrested for entering without visas.

Last week the four passengers were fined and jailed for two years; Scott-Bloxam was fined, sentenced to three years, and his plane confiscated. As one local put it: "It turned out to be a bloody long weekend."

Lawyers and consular officials have told the five jailed Australians the appeals process could take up to six months - and even then there is no guarantee the sentences will be reduced.

Pending the appeal, the five will remain in prison in Merauke. "This was an unbelievable shock to them," said Slyne, who is now in Papua.{mospagebreak}

"They were led to believe they would get a fine and a three-month jail sentence."

Slyne told the *Herald* conditions at the jail were "basic but clean".

"The people at the jail are being friendly and locals line up every day to give them food. We have had to limit the number of gifts because we don't want the other inmates to get jealous.

"They can play soccer and walk around in the yard. The conditions are relatively good."

The group's lawyer, Efreng Fangohoy, said Scott-Bloxam planned to give English lessons to the Indonesian inmates.

However, relations between the five Australians are strained as the passengers believe they were misled by their pilot about visa arrangements.

Burke, a seasoned traveller, has told friends she is "very embarrassed" that she made the mistake of trusting Scott-Bloxam to organise visas.

The 51-year-old had been to Indonesia before and enjoyed her trips there. So when an opportunity came along to fly to Papua, a place she knew little about, she jumped at the chance.

Now she is regretting the impulse and is having trouble sharing a cell with Vera Scott-Bloxam, whose husband failed to organise travel documents.

"They were told by the head of an airline that the visas were under control," Slyne said. "He was quite adamant that he knew what he was doing even though they questioned him on a number of occasions."

Burke thought it had sounded right when William Scott-Bloxam had told her a visa could be organised on arrival. In Jakarta, and at Bali's international airport at Denpasar, it is possible to get a visa on arrival. However, the movement of people to and from Papua is heavily restricted by the Indonesian Government, which has been battling a low-level separatist movement.

"Karen ... had the opportunity to go to Papua for \$500 and she thought 'why not,'" Slyne said. "She faxed off her passport details to the pilot and when she got up there, she was thrown in jail."

"A lot of people have said to Karen 'you should write a book'. But she said 'I'd be so embarrassed admitting what I did. It was just stupid.'"

Before leaving for Papua, William Scott-Bloxam contacted Tom Bolser, a pilot who is based in Merauke for the US group Mission Aviation Fellowship.

According to an MAF spokesman, the two did not know each other before the email contact.

Bolser answered some of Scott-Bloxam's questions but he claims that he assumed as an international pilot, the Australian would understand that he was required to submit a flight plan.{mospagebreak}

Slyne says the email from Bolser, which Karen Burke read after being arrested, was vague and said they "might" be able to get visas on arrival.

Repeated requests for an interview with the Scott-Bloxams, made via their lawyer, have been declined.

Most people on Thursday Island suspect sinister motives on the parts of Jakarta and Canberra, which they hold in almost equal suspicion, in allowing their neighbours such long sentences.

The feisty local newspaper, the *Torres News*, editorialised that the five's predicament "had nothing to do with visa offences, but is a diplomatic power dispute between a paranoid, oppressive Indonesian Government and successive, gutless Australian governments ... The Indonesian Government ... are clearly still sulking over the arrival of 43 West Papuans in Australia ... and this is a typical tit-for-tat response."

It is a view that finds traction at the Torres Hotel, "Australia's top pub", where Burke used to pop in for a drink after riding her bike from work.

Scott-Bloxam is a controversial figure in the islands, where he stands out from others whose lives revolve around boats and friends by owning a lodge and car hire company in Cooktown and Cape Air Transport on Horn Island. He is described variously as "dry", "abrupt", "stingy", and "grumpy".

"Scotty is a person who hates officialdom - is that a word?" said Bob at the Wongai Hotel on Horn Island. "He believes Australians are overgoverned and he tries to cut corners, and that's what he's done and got these people into a bad situation. But what he's done doesn't deserve three years in jail."

Mortimer's black yacht is still moored off Thursday Island and locals like to point it out before recounting their friend's story. He reminds them of his fate by sending text messages.

"Morning guys," the latest one said. "Cell 12 by 6 ... locked in ... broken ... 16 hours a day living on the floor ... rotten shower and toilet ... money can get you anything ... lobby local member

... all well."

with Karuni Rompies