

IN hindsight it was naive, possibly stupid.

Venturing into a troubled province on foreign soil with no official documentation was never going to end well.

But the five middle-aged Torres Strait residents – pilot William “Scotty” Scott-Bloxam, his wife Vera and passengers Keith Mortimer, Karen Burke and Hubert Hofer – had no idea what was ahead when they set off from Horn Island on that September morning last year.

They say they had little idea their destination, the Indonesian province of Papua, had been the scene of a low level insurgency for decades and was a place where heavy travel restrictions applied.

However, as soon as Scotty's plane touched down at Merauke airport they were in trouble.

“We probably should have read the travel guide but we were assured everything was okay,” Mr Mortimer, an experienced sailor throughout Asia, said.

“I don't think we are stupid people, but it was extremely naive.”

The group had tried to arrange visas before departing but when faxes and calls went unanswered they blamed poor communication systems and set off anyway, having been advised they could obtain visas at Merauke.

They also radioed the airport while still in Australian waters, advising those on the ground they didn't have visas.

The response on the other end of the line was: “Come on through, this'll just take a little while to sort out.”

“They knew we were coming, we didn't just land on their doorstep. They had flight plans, the crew list, departure list for the aeroplane and the time of departure,” Mr Mortimer said.

The “little while” turned out to be nine months – much of it spent in immigration detention or jail cells.

Authorities initially allowed the five to leave the airport for their hotel although under armed guard. But within days prosecutors collected them in a black van and placed them in custody.

Mr Mortimer said the two months they spent in an immigration detention centre were the hardest.

There was nothing to do – so little they walked in circles around the complex to keep themselves occupied.

The centre was infested with rats and the five developed medical conditions, from lung infections to scabies.

However they clung to the belief that freedom was around the corner, anticipating a slap on the wrist and a flight home. So when the District Court determined that they had committed immigration offences in January, they were shocked.

Mr Scott-Bloxam was sentenced to three years jail and the rest of the group to two years behind bars.

Conditions in prison weren't much better than the immigration facility.

The three men slept on grass mats in a two metre by 1.2 metre cell.

But their \$130 monthly prison allowance from the Australian government allowed them to live like kings, compared to the rest of the prison population.

Within two months their legal team had secured their release, pending an appeal to the High Court and they were released to a rental home in town.

However, jaded by their experience so far, Mr Mortimer says the group held little hope of a positive result and braced for a return to prison – something the 60-year-old did not believe he would survive.

"It was a life sentence as far as I was concerned, the same for Scotty," he recalls.

"So I became the escape artist."

Mr Mortimer arranged for a fisherman to smuggle the group out of the country, but was unable to convince the entire group to make the daring escape.

He later tried again, this time building a kayak out of materials from the local hardware store, which he stocked with provisions for a two-day trip to Australian waters.

The group's reluctance again scuttled the plan but it would turn out to be the right decision.

The High Court overturned the convictions in March, a decision upheld by the Supreme Court earlier this month. "It's hard to imagine that you end up in the highest court in the land for a misdemeanour case," Mr Mortimer said.

Another two weeks of frustration followed, as Indonesian authorities repeatedly delayed approval for their departure, until finally this week the five were allowed to fly home.

Back on his yacht, The Monte Christo, Mr Mortimer admitted the group would have a little difficulty adjusting to life at home after their ordeal.

He had trouble sleeping the previous night – despite enjoying a few beers and the State of Origin at the local pub – and his friend Ms Burke was similarly restless.

"I got up two or three times, walked around my boat," he said.

"You've been on a nine-month emotional rollercoaster ... the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. It's physically and mentally exhausting."

Still, he says it is good to be back.

He'll meet up with his daughters and grandchildren in a few weeks and when the weather's right he'll set sail for new waters.

He even hopes to visit Merauke again, though this time he'll arrange his own visa.