

NO SUCH THING AS A TOUGH DAY AT THE OFFICE:
JOHN BLAIR, BCLS, CLS, ALS (Ret.) Vancouver

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“It’s been the greatest fun of all time, which is what work should be,” says B.C. Land Surveyor John Blair, with great satisfaction, of his more than thirty-five years working in the surveying and mapping field in Canada and abroad.

The Vancouver-based Vice-President of Geomatics for McElhanney Consulting Services Ltd. immigrated to Canada from his homeland of Australia in 1973, soon after getting his Australian surveying licence. Knowing nothing about Canada’s climate other than it was likely to be cold in winter, he chose the wrong time of year to head north: “I’d arrived in Vancouver, and bought a car to drive to Alberta, where I was told there was a lot of pipeline and oil exploration work,” Blair reminisces. “But it was January! When I got to Kamloops, B.C., it was about minus ten degrees Celsius, with about a metre of snow.” By the time the half-frozen Aussie arrived in Calgary it was down to minus thirty. “I thought, ‘If I go any further east, I’m going to die!’ So I stopped there.”

It was a fortuitous choice, even if it was stimulated by practicality. Eager to make use of his newly-acquired mapping and surveying skills, and infected with the travelling bug—especially to countries with hot climates—within a year Blair had landed a job with McElhanney, heading to a mapping job in Tanzania. “It was probably the last of the traditional mapping surveys done where they used conventional theodolites and tellurometers, and built towers over flat terrain for observation,” he recalls.

Blair has never looked back. Since then he has worked in dozens of countries—always having fun. He has been chased by elephants, camped out amongst lions, and

even found himself inside a Tanzanian jail cell after innocently venturing into a prohibited secure zone. “I saw a sign that said ‘No Through Road’ and had no idea it meant I wasn’t supposed to go up it—all I could see was the perfect mountain top for making some observations!” He talked his way out of that sticky situation only to find himself back behind bars a few days later after unwittingly cutting off the Tanzanian president’s car en route to the airport in Dodoma.

Blair also has fond recollections of his days working on satellite positioning for oil drilling rigs off the east coast of Canada. “I spent a lot of time in the Atlantic on research vessels. These were vessels that did site surveys for where the rigs were to be positioned. I was also involved in the navigation and survey work for moving rigs onto their final positions. We used the Doppler satellite navigation system, the predecessor to the Global Positioning System (GPS).”

But some of Blair’s favourite memories are more recent and distinctly more rewarding, stemming from two projects in Indonesia and Cambodia. The latter project focussed on land administration, or the development of recognized and registered land ownership titles, and won McElhanney a David Thompson National Geomatics Award in 2008 in the Contribution to Society category. “We take land titles for granted in the western world,” explains Blair, “but it is not a normal process in some countries where the land is held in traditional occupation models. What issuing a government-registered title does is provide security to the occupier of the land—the owner—which gives him the ability to raise finance and improve the property.”

The challenges in Cambodia were numerous. Many Cambodians had been driven from the lands they had traditionally occupied by the conflict that had racked the country

under the Khmer Rouge. By the beginning of the 2000s, they were returning, but some land was now held by squatters. Many people had died in the conflict, and there were disputes about who was entitled to reoccupy their land. Severe poverty prevailed, inhibiting solutions, as did the ubiquitous presence of land mines in the region.

In 2002, in partnership with Michael Simmons of Victoria, B.C.-based Geospatial International Inc. and international land mine detection and removal group the Halo Trust, Blair successfully persuaded the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to fund a land administration project in Cambodia.

“When we first went to the area, we weren’t fully aware of the extent of the land mine problem,” said Blair. “As a surveyor, I was simply looking for any existing survey control points to reference our mapping and survey work to. But I was quickly told not to go into remote locations because those places were typically exactly where the land mines were—along the edges of roads, for example.” A chastened Blair rapidly changed his approach. “I quickly got into the habit, when walking through the fields, of having a knowledgeable local in front of me. I would step exactly in his footsteps all the way, even on established paths.” By mid-2004, the project was complete. Five villages had been surveyed successfully, with no loss of life or injury, and twenty-eight Cambodian men and women had been trained to continue the work. “The project was so successful we were able to secure CIDA funding in 2006 to continue the land titling program for another five years,” says Blair.

When Blair heard about the massive tsunami that occurred in Southeast Asia on Boxing Day, 2004, and the devastation of the Indonesian province of Aceh, his mind instantly turned to the experience in Cambodia. Working with the Red Cross,

McElhanney went into action. The Red Cross had a goal of building 12,500 new houses along the north coast of the island of Sumatra. For the first phase of the program, which was concluded by the time of the second anniversary of the tsunami on December 26, 2006, McElhanney provided the mapping, surveying, environmental and land titling work required to set up 2,400 homes. As a result of that success, the Red Cross then asked McElhanney to undertake a far more extensive community planning project in Indonesia's remote northwestern Aceh Jaya district.

Blair describes the Aceh experience as "one of the most challenging projects" the company has ever experienced, not only because of the extent of the destruction, but also because of the politics and diverse interests involved. By the end of 2008, however, the project was largely complete, with all nineteen community plans in place. For Blair and his colleagues, the gratification of helping the people in those communities regain their homes and businesses was more than worthwhile.

For a guy who once thought he'd like to follow in his uncle's steps as a builder, surveying has proved to be a diverse and fascinating career choice Blair has never regretted: "I think it's like any profession, you can take any direction and you adapt to it," he says. "I'm certainly glad I didn't do anything else."