

1934 to 2024 90th anniversary Rempi to Rebiamul



At a previous anniversary, pilgrims trekking over the Bismarck Range following the footsteps of the first missionaries in 1934.

(Photographs by Peter Petrus)



Pilgrims arriving at Rebiamul to celebrate an earlier anniversary of the Rempi to Rebiamul trek. Thousands joined in the celebrations when the pilgrims arrived at each place on the trek.

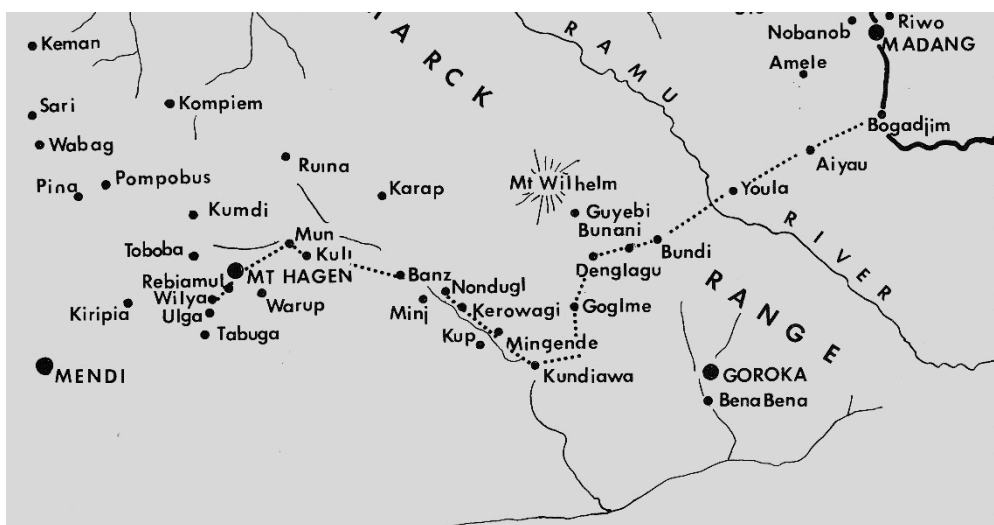


Photograph 1971. Father Ross with Peter Manui at the Rebiamul Mission.

Peter Manui accompanied Fr Ross on his trek from Rempì to Rebiāmul in 1934. He worked at the Rebiāmul mission all his life and remembered many details of the trip including where they camped, what they ate, the people they met and the weather they endured.

Father Ross SVD, at the Rebiāmul Mission, Mt Hagen in 1971. He had worked at Rempì Village near Alexishafen near Madang for several years before making the trek to Mt Hagen in 1934 with several other missionaries and 70 carriers. Now 90 years later it is good to celebrate his achievements and the growth of the church since then. There are now over 100,000 Catholics in the area.

Rempì to Rebiāmul is the name of Fr Ross's expedition to the Highlands of Papua New Guinea in 1934. He was the first missionary to the Western Highlands. 90 years later there are now half a million Catholics in the Highlands in many mission stations including Rebiāmul. He left Rempì on 15th February 1934 and arrived at Rebiāmul on 27th March 1934. 2024 is the 90th year since the trip. What an amazing venture.



**Madang and Highland areas of Papua New Guinea.
Showing the route taken by Fr Ross in his 1934 trek into the Highlands.**



Fr Ross SVD with the Rempi people 1934.

On the 15th February 1934 with much celebration and good wishes the expedition departed from Rempi and Alexishafen on board the *Stella Maris* a large inter-coastal vessel. Missionaries, Father Ross, Father Tropper and Brother Eugene and 70 carriers and much cargo went by sea to Bogadjim where they met up with Mr Laufer, a plantation manager.

Interestingly von Hagen, a German Official was buried at Bogadjim and Hagen was named after him. Here the groups spent a couple of days getting organised and left about 19th February. The well-worn track was over the Finisterre Range and down to the Ramu River and they camped at Aiyau village near the Ramu river. The next day they were able to ford the river without incident in spite of the threat of crocodiles. They camped at Kwato village and then up the hills to Yaula where they camped again. The next day they continued the climb to Moto where they camped and the following day they reached the Ramu River.

Fr Ross SVD wrote:

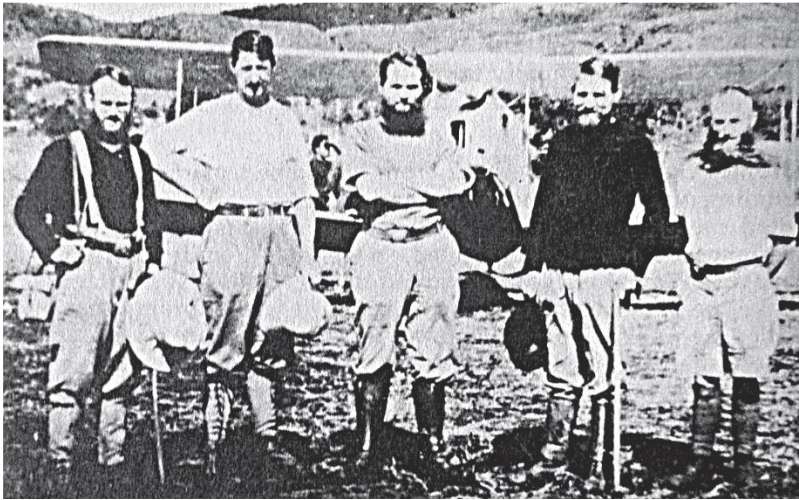
The last few hours before we reached the Ramu River we were travelling over a corduroy road. The banks of the river apparently had flooded and this road had been just like a swamp. Whoever had used it had put down trees from time to time and we were hopping from one log to the next for a couple of hours, until we reached the river. There were a few natives on the other side and they came over. We negotiated with them to carry us across in two dug-outs. We had seventy carriers and cargo and it took the whole day to get cross.

They made camp there on the banks of the Ramu at Yolapa. They were plagued with mosquitoes and the carriers were given quinine as a precaution. Next day they walked as far as the Takuya River. It was river country and they did not meet any people. As the line of carriers stretched a long way back one of the missionaries led the way and the other two brought up the rear in case of attack a storm was brewing and they managed to get camp set up at Inau before the deluge came down. This was the last night before the climb to Bundi.



Bundi people in 1994 (M. Mennis)

Bundi was an established mission where they were to meet up with Fr Schaefer SVD and Fr Aufenanger SVD. The cold wet night was again followed by a hot steamy day with little shade. They got sunburnt on their legs. After a stiff climb they reached the Bundi mission



which was an established mission centre with a church and mission house. The mission boys hurried down the track to meet them and carried them up the hill which was tortuous on their sun-burnt legs. Fr Schaefer had waited for the party to arrive but had given up and gone on a tour of the out-stations. As soon as they heard Father Ross and the others had arrived, they hot-footed it back to Bundi to greet them.

The first missionaries into Mt Hagen, March 1934. From left: Fr Tropper, Br Eugene Frank, Fr Alphonse Schaefer, Fr Aufenanger and Fr William Ross SVD.

Bishop Wolf SVD had nominated Father Ross as the leader, but the forceful Fr Schaefer took the lead as he had already traversed part of the course and was a friend of the headman, Kavagl who was going to take them to the Chimbu valley. After a few days rest Father Ross and his party were ready to go. There were five missionaries in the party: Fr Ross, Fr Schaefer, Fr Tropper, Fr Aufenanger and Brother Eugene Frank. All SVD. They crossed the Bismarck Ranges and followed the route which Fr Schaefer had followed the year before.

On the first day after Bundi, the track went up and down gorges sometimes up steep cliffs or down slippery descents with Kavagl and his people leading the way. Their first stopping place was at Nambugi where it was cold and the coastal carriers shivered as they were unaccustomed to the cold. The following night at Bunoni was even colder at two thousand feet, six hundred metres above sea level. Next morning they were treated to beautiful views in all directions. Behind them, the many ridges fingered down to the mist-covered Ramu Valley and beyond were the Finisterre Ranges and in the distance was the ocean. They were on a spur of the Bismarck Range and towering above them was Mt Wilhelm and ahead was the Chimbu Valley where tumbling rivers cut a deep swathe through deep gorges.

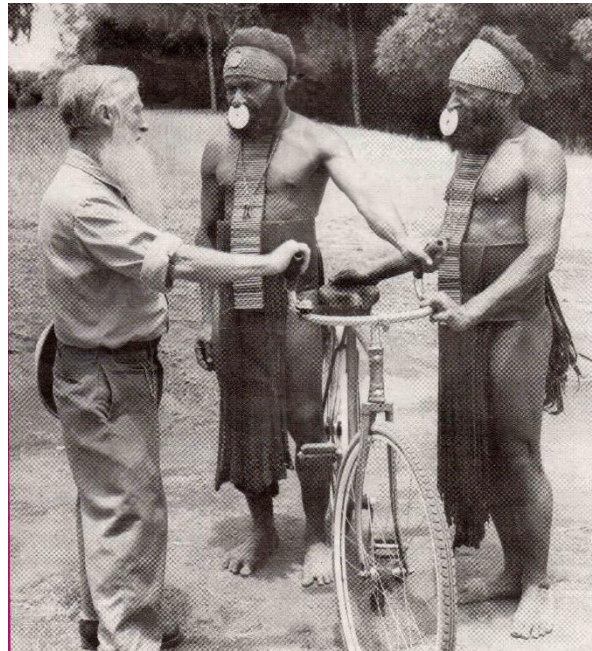
That day they descended to Denglagu, the source of the Chimbu River, which they crossed over two large logs and then climbed 500 metres to Inau where they camped. That night some Chimbu warriors appeared in the dark and the security men scared them off without waking the missionaries. They were probably after the many shells which were being carried as trade items. The next night, they camped at Goglme and the carriers were warned to be careful as it was unfamiliar territory. This did not stop some of them gate-crashing a local courtship ceremony. Next morning some of the villagers complained and Fr Schaefer dealt with the offenders in front of the villagers to their satisfaction.

The next stop was Kamanigl where a big singsing was being held. The people were all colourfully dressed in feathers and headbands made of the green beetles. The drumming and dancing continued all night. Some of the people were frightened by the appearance of white

men but others had seen Fr Schaefer and his party the previous year. They thought they were spirits of the dead until they saw them eating.

Fr Ross with two Hagen chiefs Wamp Wan and Ninji Kama. 1934.

The last camping ground on the Chimbu River was at Merani near present day Kundiawa, being the most southerly part of the trek. From here they turned west for the final 100 kilometres to Mt Hagen. Next place was Koruguru area where Kavagl was the headman. He offered them a site at Dimbe for a mission but they preferred a site at nearby Mingende which was still in his area. The people of Koruguru were so welcoming that both Father Ross and Father Schaefer decided the area would make a suitable headquarters for the whole Western Highlands. They continued on to Kerowagi, Nonugl, Banz Kilua and then Wilya near Rebiamul. It was 27th March 1934.



Mick Leahy's Diary Wednesday 28th March 1934.

Big excitement amongst the natives **yesterday** morning and a crowd of them on a ridge on the road along from Kaduwere --- through the glasses we could make out a couple of white men and a long line of carriers. Went along the road to meet them having a pretty fair idea that it was the missionaries from Sek (Alexishafen). which it turned out to be - five of them altogether including Fathers Ross, Schaefer Aufenanger, Tropper, and Brother Eugene. They had had a good trip and brought back Rebier the little *monki* whom we took out with us last year and loaned to Father Ross so he could learn the language. He looks well and has grown 50% since I last saw him. All the white men of the party look well and are enthusiastic about the country.

The next day I rigged the Morobe tent on the drome and Father Ross celebrated Holy Mass in it using our table as an altar. There were about 40 boys, the priests, brother, Dan and I. We went to confession and communion. Father Schaefer sang the Mass with the boys in Pidgin English and the whole service was a good effort for Mount Hagen.

It was the first Mass at Wilya (later Rebiamul) in the Western Highlands of New Guinea.

Father Schaefer SVD wrote about the trek from Bundi to Hagen.

Five weeks ago I had to take three missionaries, Fathers Ross and Tropper and Brother Eugene, over the Mondia Pass down the Simbu Valley into the Wahgi Valley where they were going to open a new station. With Father Aufenanger I waited for the three in Bundi. After their arrival we set out on 7th March with 45 carriers, crossed the Mondia mountain pass into the Simbu Valley and down it to the Korugu area. On that flat spot we decided

to start a station. The Korugu people sold us a suitable place called Dimbi, five minutes walk from Korugu Hill. After that we continued down the valley looking for a site for an aerodrome. At a place called Mingende we found one that we thought we could make a landing field.

On 21st March we left Korugu to follow west along the Wahgi River towards Mount Hagen. On the way we passed through many villages. Some of these were engaged in warfare. Local people living only one hour's walk apart had murdered each other, devastated their gardens, hacked down all trees, burned the houses. It looked like real war. Towards us, however, the warriors showed friendship. On our side, however, we, marching through that region at the time, had to be very cautious and prudent and not trust those fighting warriors further than we could see them.

On 27th March we reached Kobe in Mount Hagen. Here we met with two gold miners, two brothers named Leahy, employed by a company to prospect for gold. They gave us a friendly welcome and we stayed with them for a few days. It was around Easter time and an airplane landed near the place to bring the two brothers some provisions. The population in the Mount Hagen region is surrounded by three mountain chains. Father Ross wishes to settle down in this area and do mission work. Father Tropper and Brother Eugene want to settle in the Korugu neighbourhood.

Mick Leahy mentioned that Father Schaefer would return to his station in the Bismarcks, while Fathers Ross and Tropper and Brother Eugene were going to make a station between the Chimbu and the Kundies at a place called Koruguru, near Mingende and gradually work inland up the valley for some years to come. Mick thought this would be “an effective barrier to any other mission, as they would be in the pick position for aerodromes etc which will be about the only means of working in this valley for some years to come”.

On Friday 30th March they were expecting a plane to fly in. The only trouble was the pilot might not have known about the new airstrip so Brother Eugene and Dan went to the old airstrip again in case the pilot landed there by mistake. Beside the new airstrip Mick stationed boys with four stacks of grass ready to light as soon as the plane appeared. There was no sign of him all day. Father Ross counted the approximate number of people waiting near the airstrip and got up to 1480. Mick Leahy commented: “they were coming in all the time and 1800 to 2,000 would not be an exaggerated count. They went home very disappointed that the *balus* never showed up and I suppose thinking we tricked them”.

Mick Leahy:

Saturday 31st March was a beautiful clear morning, Mount Hagen being clear almost the whole day, Father Ross had three special shells and when he produced them there was a rush to bring in their pigs, but such lousy little ones that we would not buy them. Eventually Metar brought along a really good pig and we gave the shells to him. The mission at Sek (Alexishafen) will get an aeroplane right away and once that is going will service all the interior country.

An early mission plane.



About 10.30 the Fox Moth was sighted and they got the smoke signals going. He flew right over Giluwe, circled the drome then made a very good landing. Their brother Jim Leahy was on board having a free ride with Bob Gurney. They were full of southern news and were amazed to see five

Europeans besides Mick and Danny Leahy at the airstrip. The Leahy brothers were getting ready to set off across the country fossicking for gold from camp 19 to camp 40 and then back to the Base Camp.

Monday 2 April 1934. Bob and Jim got away as soon as it cleared up --- The missionary party got away about two hours later. They are taking the track on this side of the Wahgi which will not be so boggy and swampy and will probably be hung up for a day or two crossing the river lower down. The vine bridges being very insecure and require a whole lot of reinforcing before a long line of boys and cargo can be got over.

Fr Ross was often asked what the reaction of the people was to the first plane

At first they considered the plane which came roaring out of the sky as a ghost. They viewed it as a terrible spirit come to destroy them. Some people lay face down on the ground and did not look up for an hour. Others who were more adventurous rushed to their houses and killed the first pig they could lay their hands on as a sacrifice to this awful monster. Today these same people roar with laughter when they describe how many pigs they gave to this metal ghost (1956 Fr Ross. Thirty year man).

The day the plane left, was Easter Monday 2 April 1934 and they returned to Mingende, where they intended to open the first mission station. Bishop Wolf had continually emphasised the importance of no big gaps between stations. The only station established so far was the one at Bundi and the distance between Bundi and Mt Hagen would have been over 100 miles. Bishop Wolf had impressed on the missionaries that they should start the first station in the Chimbu area which is not too far from Bundi – thirty miles. From there when they were established, they could go further west towards Mt Hagen. So they set about establishing a mission at Mingende and Fr Schaefer returned to Denglagu.

Fr Ross with his Hagen people in the 1940's . He was the first missionary there in 1934 and. 90 years later there are now half a million Catholics in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea in many mission stations including Rebiamul.



Fr Ross's 1934 Rempi - Rebiamul expedition

Calendar - February 1934

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Bogadjim	Aiyau	Kwato	Yaula		Moto	Yolapa.
25	26	27	28			
	Wau climbed to Bundi		Bundi			

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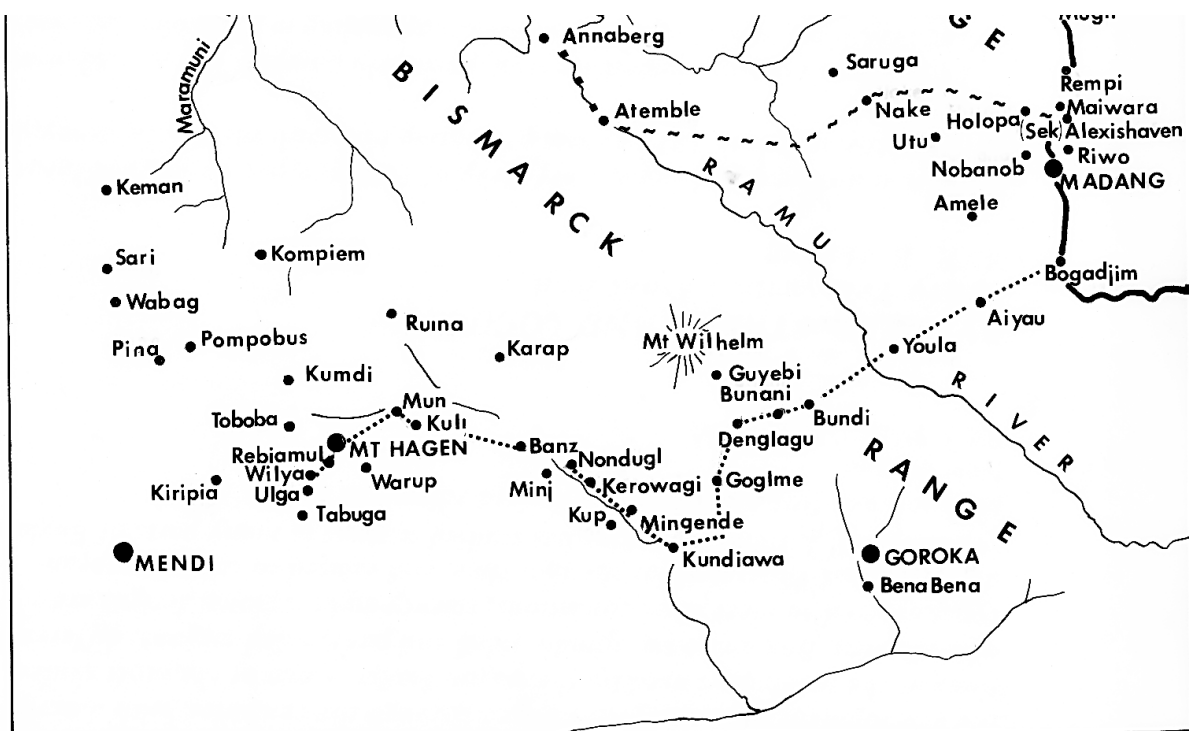
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Calendar - March 1934

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 Bundi	2 Bundi rest time	3
4	5 Bundi	6 Bundi	7 Bundi	8 Nambagl	9 Bunoni	10 Denglagu,
11	12	13 Inau Gogolme Gogolme	14	15 Kamanigl	16	17 Merani
18 Merani	19	20 Korugu Korugu (Mingende)	21	22 Kerowagi,	23	24 Nonugl,
25 Banz Kilua	26	27	28	29	30	31

Close up of the route taken by the early missionaries in 1934. I was able to draw this map up from information from Fr Ross SVD and Peter Manui in 1971. M. Mennis.



MADANG and HIGHLAND AREAS
PAPUA NEW GUINEA