



YEARS TO REMEMBER

Bro Jim Coucher's memories of his time in PNG

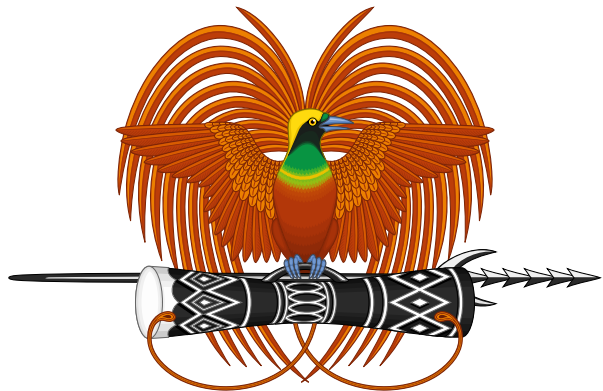


Table of Contents

<i>My Appointment to the Mission in PNG.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Arrival Vanimu</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>The job I thought I had left behind.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Fr Gregory</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>My first posting.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>All alone</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Recalled.</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Bewani Station.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Amanab Church.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Lote</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Ossima</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>St Joseph's Agriculture Training Centre</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Cattle</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>The Tjoeng family</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>The Farm</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Pigs</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Crocodiles.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>DOV Construction.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Senta Bilong Helpim.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Tsunami</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Thanks.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Special thanks</i>	<i>39</i>



My Appointment to the Mission in PNG

In 1962 I was posted to our juniorate at St Ives NSW, from our student house in Adelaide. My job was to paint the outside of the monastery. I did not get a lot done when I was asked to work on our duck farm as Bro Stan, who had been doing the ducks fell ill.

There were thousands of ducks on the property. Each week we would receive 500 day- old ducklings and each week we killed 500 6-week-old ducks which were delivered to the buyers in the city. It was a fulltime job as we were constantly moving ducks from pen to pen and the pens had to be cleaned thoroughly. One day in each week was taken up with killing, plucking, and dressing the ducks which were then dropped into tubs of ice water. When they were chilled, they were drained and then vacuum packed. The next day the dressed ducks were delivered to the buyers.

The first day I did the deliveries in Sydney, I got hopelessly lost. I panicked a bit as it was a hot day and I had a load of ducks on board. I remember taking a left turn and I had gone about a block when cars started coming at me with horns blasting. I had no choice but to put the van into reverse and get out as fast as I dared drive. I drove around Sydney for awhile and eventually saw a policeman on point duty. I drove right up to him and asked if he could point me in the right direction. He kindly told me where to go. I ended up asking that policeman 3 times, not realizing that it was the same cop each time. The 3rd time I stopped to ask him, he asked me where I was from and I told him I was from Melbourne. He said, "that explains it". He then told me to wait as he was due to be relieved and he was just waiting for his mate to take over. The policeman then got in the van with me and took me to where I had to go

One day when we were busy with the killings, one of the students came and told me that the Provincial wanted to see me. It was the first time I had ever been summoned by the Provincial and I was a bit anxious, anyhow I went and fronted up, still in my killing clothes which were covered in blood and feathers and he asked me if I would consider going to PNG. He could have knocked me down with one of the feathers. I told him that I would love to go. He asked me why I had never applied, and I

told him that I did not think I would be any good as a teacher, thinking that is what I would be doing. His reply was "I realize that Brother, but you will not be asked to teach". Three weeks later I was winging my way to PNG in a DC 6 to Moresby and a DC 3 to Wewak and then a Cessna 180 to Aitape and finally a Cessna 172 to Vanimo. All I knew was that I would not be teaching.

Arrival Vanimo

I arrived in Vanimo at 7.30am on the 12th December 1962. It had been a long trip. Fr Pat Cooper and I left Sydney together with, the late, Fr. Greg Kirby, who was returning from leave. We arrived in Moresby where Greg informed us that he had a lot to do before leaving. After a few days, Pat and I got sick of waiting and so we flew onto Lae. There were a few more days before we were able to get a flight to Wewak, which was then the end of the line. We spent another week in Wewak, walking to the airstrip each day to see if there was any plane destined for Vanimo. We eventually hopped aboard a plane for Aitape and again we had to sit tight until the missionaries in Vanimo needed supplies flown into their outstations. The call came after a few days and so we were off at last for our destination. We took off at first light and arrived in time to see Bro Anthony (Sarge) coming ashore from Lote in the mission boat with all the supplies on board. There were no vehicles in town and so Pat and I set about helping Sarge to carry all the supplies to the end of the airstrip and then getting the loads ready for the outstations. Everything had to be weighed. There was a hanging scale which we attached to the branch of a tree and then we would hang each parcel on the scale and the weights were tallied until we had a load for the plane. The pilot had told us, when he was leaving on the previous flight, what weight he wanted. The load would be made up and was ready when he returned. A second load for one of the coastal stations was made up ready in case the weather closed in on the mountains. It was a long, hot day and we were there until 5.30pm, without food, and then we had to carry the goods that the pilot did not have time to move, back to the boat and then across the bay and up the hill to Lote.

The job I thought I had left behind

By this time, I was feeling exhausted and I wondered how the heck Bro. Anthony would have managed on his own, but he had been doing it for a long while. However, the day had not yet finished. Sarge asked me to go and see his ducks while he fed them. Feeling tired and having left St Ives in Sydney where we had a duck farm and killed 500 a week (that was my last job), I was not at all excited, however I went with him. Strangely there were no ducks to see. We looked around and eventually found a huge python, curled up asleep, with 6 lumps (Sarge's ducks) inside of it. It was almost Christmas and Bro Anthony thought that it would be nice to have something special for Christmas, something a bit better than bully beef. The next thing I knew was that we were killing the snake, removed the ducks from the snake and my first job at Lote was to pluck the ducks, put them into plastic bags and into the freezer ready for Christmas. Neither Bro Anthony or I said anything about where the ducks came from and a good meal was had by all.

Fr Gregory

I must mention at this stage that Fr Greg arrived 6 weeks later. We had left Sydney together. He asked Fr Ray and me to wait for him after we got to Moresby as he had a few things to do. We knew Fr Greg and so we told him we would go on. It took Ray and me a further 10 days to get to Vanimo. Greg was supposed to celebrate Christmas Mass at Lote. As it turned out he did not arrive until 6 weeks after Christmas. It was left to Fr Ray to say the Mass but because he could not speak pidgin English, we had to get Fr Anselm to walk from Leitre. It was an 11 hour walk in the sun, walking along the beach sand. He got to Lote and went to the church where there were hundreds of people waiting to go to confession. He heard right up until midnight Mass and then early the next morning he walked back to Leitre and celebrated Christmas in his parish, he was not a happy chappy. Greg just carried on as if it had all been arranged.

My first posting

Soon after Greg's arrival, I was asked to go out to Imonda and help Cletus (now known as Fr. Jeff) to set up a new mission station. Fr Clement Spencer was also appointed to open a station at Kamberatoro and so he also came to Imonda and Cletus would then walk with him to Kamberatoro. Fr Clement and I set off to Imonda together, first, flying to Amanab, the closest strip to Imonda, where we were met by 28 carriers who were to lead us and carry all our gear on the trek through the jungle to Imonda. Unfortunately, being new to the country, we overloaded the carriers which slowed them down and so we went on ahead with a guide. After 11 hours walking, we called it a day. The trouble was that our carriers who had all our rations were way behind and had stopped at another village. There was no one in the village where we had stopped for the night and so we had to bed down on the floor without any food or any sleeping gear. It was a long night with little sleep and so, with stomachs rumbling with hunger, we set off at first light. It was another 9 hours before we eventually stumbled into Imonda where we were met by Cletus. First thing on the agenda was a feed. In those days there were no refrigerators and so no fresh food. Everything was out of tins and I remember gorging myself on sausages and vegetables and tinned pears. Soon I was violently ill and had to make a dash for the toilet, my first experience of a pit toilet. The thing I missed most in the bush was a decent toilet. I never got used to the pit. The water table was high, and you had to jump to avoid splash back also you had to hang on for dear life or the blow flies would lift you off the seat. I became a specialist at building seats over the pits in the different places I was based.

Imonda was real mission work and for a year we lived in rather poor conditions. Our bush hut was about 4 x 3metres with a division in the middle. As well as housing the 3 of us, it was also the trade store. There was no kitchen or stove and no fresh water. Cooking was done on a piece of arc mesh outside the house. Thinking back, there was not much cooking except for rice. The rest was tinned meat heated up. Sago grubs, like witchety grubs, were fried for breakfast. There was nothing to entice me to lunch.

Food and supplies were always in short supply as we had to rely on infrequent air drops and so saksak (sago) and saksak grubs were often on the menu. For a bit of variety, I would go out to shoot a bird, most of which did not have much meat on them but at least they made good soup.

All alone

In the first week of my arrival, Cletus set off with Clem to open up Kamberatoro and so I was left on my own to run things which mainly consisted of organizing the workers and getting materials ready for the new mission house I was to build. It was exceedingly difficult as I had not made much headway with Pidgin Inglis, not that it would have helped much as Bahasa Indonesia was the spoken language. For weeks there was no one there that I could have a conversation with. I had a team of workers with whom I could not communicate, however it was amazing the amount of work we did in the 6 weeks that Cletus was away. After settling Clem in at Kamberatoro, Cletus came back to Imonda, but he was not often at home as he would be out visiting his parish for weeks at a time. He also started another mission station at Utai in readiness for Fr Greg to take over as well as visiting Clem from time to time to make sure that he was okay.

In the meantime, I had set up a pit saw which consisted of a bed made from logs about 2 metres above the ground. We would then manhandle the logs, which had been cut and dragged to the site, up onto the bed and after marking the log where the cuts were to be made. A team of us would take turns on the saw. One man would be on top and one underneath, pushing and pulling the saw. It was slow, hard, hot, and dirty work and for the man underneath, it was very dirty work. By the end of a day, if all went well, we may have cut 18 x 3metre lengths of 75 x 50mm planks. The planks we cut were great but it would take forever to get enough timber for the house and so I had enough workers to set up another saw pit. I had never built a house before and I had no idea of how much timber was needed. Once we had a fair supply of different size timber, I decided that I would split the workers up again and I would take 3 of them to help me start the house. I was told not to expect too much out of the workers, but I had no trouble and they worked like trojans. In one of our breaks they

indicated to me that they didn't know that white men worked, they had only seen the patrol officers and they would go out with their long, white socks and workers would follow carrying deck chairs and umbrellas and so they would sit and send police out to give the orders. They got a shock when I came along, dressed for work in shorts, boots, and hat.

It took a year to build the airstrip and, in that time, I had built a church, a school and dormitory, all out of bush timbers as well as our own 3-bedroom house built from our own sawn timber.



The mission house at Imonda, built by Bro Jim in 1963

Recalled

As soon as the airstrip was opened, I was recalled to Lote. It was sad leaving Imonda as I had only lived for about 1 week in the new house, but I packed my tools and was very glad that I was able to fly out instead of the long walk back to Amanab.

I did not know what I would be doing back on the coast but I was looking forward to being back there and enjoying the beautiful beaches but that was not to be. Mons. Pascal Sweeney asked me to go and open a station at Bewani.

Bewani Station

Bewani was part of the Ossima parish and I was there to build a house and church for Fr. Ignatius, the parish priest of Ossima. Conditions at that time were remarkably like Imonda except for the fact that all my water was collected from a swamp. I would leave my showering until dark but, I would boil all the water that I used for drinking and cooking. I would wait for dark then I would collect water from the swamp, hang a bucket, with a shower head fitted in the bottom, from a tree and have my wash.

I was at Bewani for 12 months and each fortnight I would walk to Ossima, 6 hours one way, for Mass.

While at Bewani, I had a radio receiver and received an urgent message from the Mons (Paschal) to go to Lote immediately. It was Good Friday and I had no idea what the emergency was but of course my imagination worked overtime and so I set off, on foot, for the long hike (13 hours). Unfortunately, I got lost and had no idea where I was when darkness fell. I stumbled upon a creek and knew that if I followed it that I would end up on the coast and so stepped into the creek and continued on until I heard a loud splash and I immediately thought "crocodile" and so left the creek and eventually sought shelter at the base of a big tree. It was pouring rain. I curled up on the ground, but sleep was out of the question. I was starving, soaking wet, frozen stiff and imagined that there were spiders and snakes all around me and of course there was the big splash that I had heard which I knew would have to have been made by a big crocodile. It was a long night and so, at the first hint of light, I set off tired, cold, sore, and hungry. As it turned out I was only 1 hour from the coast and a further 2 hours to Lote. I was surprised when I got there that the Mons did not say anything about the emergency. I was there for 3 days when I asked him what the emergency was. I could not believe it when he told me that he wanted me to make a fly screen and fit it to one of the rooms for a new lay missionary, Val Hill, who would soon be arriving to work as his secretary. I made and fitted the screen and walked back to Bewani.

From Bewani I was off to Amanab again, to build a house and a church for the Kamberatoro parish.

Amanab Church

I considered this my worst assignment in all my years on the mission. There was a government official based at Amanab and he was anti-Catholic. I had to ask him for somewhere to live and so he gave me a storeroom down by the airstrip with no facilities. I asked him about a toilet and was told to use the one at the back of his office. It was just a long drop but when I used it the second day without seeking permission, I was told off and so had to ask him every time I wanted to use it. Each morning I would go to the office to get the permission to use the loo and he would keep me waiting, even though he knew very well what I wanted.

I had no water tanks and there was no creek or swamp nearby and so I used to wait until dark, take a couple of buckets and steal water from the tanks at the protestant mission about 10 minutes away. They too were very anti-Catholic and did not want us to settle in Amanab.

As I did at Bewani, I also taught religion in the government school. I used to find that exceedingly difficult, especially at Amanab, as all I wanted to do was get the buildings finished and to get out.

Fr Gregory would fly in every 3 weeks or so to say Mass. He would use a case of beer, not ours but one in the store where I lived, as an altar. After mass he would usually fly back to Vanimo on the same day, weather permitting as it was not very pleasant sleeping on bags of rice with rats running all over you.

Lote

After Amanab it was back to Lote where I was involved with building, making bricks for the building program as well as galvanized water tanks. A team of builders had come from Sydney to do as much of the building program as they could in 3 months. I worked with the builders and it was my job to keep the brick making going and to keep up supplies to the builders so as there was no time lost. Also keeping up the materials for the brick makers so as they could meet their daily tally. I was there for about another 12 months.

Ossima

As I worked in the different places around the diocese the one common thing, I found was malnutrition. I spoke to the Bishop about the situation and what could be done about it. A farm at Ossima was the result of the talks and so I moved from Lote to Ossima in 1967. I was only there for about 3 months when I was called back to Lote to build a house for the Josephite sisters who were coming to work on our mission. The sisters never lived in the house but were allocated another and the one I built became known as the "Haus Kai". It was the house where everyone came together for the evening meal and was a place where missionaries from the bush stations could stay when they came in for a break. When it was all finished, I went back to Ossima where I stayed for the next 25 years working at the agricultural school I had already started. They were wonderful years. A lot of hard work but that did not bother me. It was also extremely rewarding to be able to see the farm develop as well as the improvement it made to the lives of the people.

St Joseph's Agriculture Training Centre

When I started ST. Joseph's ATC, I did not have a clear vision of what I was going to do. It became quite clear to me that something had to be done to improve the health and nutrition of the people, particularly the bush people who had a life span of 25 years. The coastal people were much better off because they had so much fish in their diet. It was just so important that the issue of malnutrition be addressed and so it was my intention to introduce better gardening techniques. Word went out around the area and applicants came from everywhere. There were far too many for me to work with and so I selected 30 lads who had done grade 6. They were great lads, keen to learn and were hard workers. I kept the first group for 4 years as I wanted the place to be well set up before a new intake. One of the lads suffered epilepsy, which I had not realized until he was well settled in. He was just so keen to learn that I decided to keep him on. One Sunday evening some of the lads came to tell me that Julian was missing. It was a real dilemma for me because I did not have a clue as to where he might be as they were free to go where they liked on

a Sunday. Because of his sickness, Julian did not go very far. I sent the boys off in different directions. I set off down river for quite a distance and then started to search on my way back. I found Julian's body caught up in a log jam. This was my first close encounter with death. I put Julian over my shoulder and set off for home. It was several weeks later, again on a Sunday afternoon one of the boys came to tell me that there was a body in the river and because of their fear of being involved, I was the one to retrieve the body. It was not a pleasant job as the body had been in the river several hours. It was bloated and the part out of the water was sunburnt and the part in the water had been eaten by fish. I buried the body by the side of the river and then covered it with banana leaves and large stones. The next morning, I reported the death at our morning radio schedule. The police got the message around 10.am , they then got in touch with the hospital and by the time they were all ready, organised the plane, it was nearing 1pm when we finally set out to retrieve the body from its overnight grave. It was then put in a body bag and taken back to the plane and flown to Vanimo. It was obvious the young man had been murdered. He had been struck a violent blow to the head with the back of an axe.

There is one story I must tell, and this is about the most suitable time to fit it in. We were at breakfast one morning when there was a great commotion outside our house. Fr Ignatius got up and went to see what all the noise was about, I continued with my breakfast and I can vividly remember, it was tinned spaghetti on toast. Anyhow as I was sucking in the spaghetti, Fr Ig came back and said that I was needed down below. I asked what the problem was, and he told me that there was a woman carried in and she had been in labour for 2 days. I knew that our plane had gone to Wewak for service and so there was no way of getting her out to Vanimo. So, I went down to have a look, not knowing what I could do. The poor woman was in a terrible state. There was one arm presenting. I went back to tell Fr Ig and told him of my concern if something went wrong. Ig said he would go and talk to them. He told the husband that his wife would surely die if nothing was done but Bro Jim was experienced with cattle and pigs, so he is prepared to try and get the baby out. He, the husband, (unfortunately) said to go for it. I pushed the remainder of my spaghetti aside; I had lost my appetite. I did everything

I could to delay what was ahead for me, not to mention the poor woman. I washed my hands and arms, put pots of water on to boil and collected towels, just as you see on TV. Fr Ig in the meantime had gone down and baptized the hand of the baby. I could not put it off any longer. I told Ig to get on the radio and keep calling to see if there was a plane in the area that could be diverted. I went back to the task at hand. If it was a cow giving birth I would not have hesitated but would have pushed the calf back inside and turned it until the protruding limb was back in the right place and so I thought that was the way to go with the baby. I spent a bit of time washing and disinfecting the area and was just beginning to push when Fr Ig sang out to wait, there was a plane on the way. It had taken off from Vanimó for Wewak when air traffic control called the pilot and asked him to divert to Ossima for a medical emergency. What a relief it was for me. The mother survived but sadly the baby died.

For some reason I have never been able to eat spaghetti on toast again.

Cattle

The centre had not been going long when I was asked if I wanted the cattle from Lote. Without any hesitation I said yes. We needed a source of protein and what better way than cattle. Then came the dilemma of how to get them to Ossima. Flying was a possibility but flying one beast at a time would prove to be too expensive. The only other possibility was walking them through the jungle and over the mountains in the coastal range to Ossima.

I set off on the 10-hour walk with the trainees for Vanimó and as we walked, we cut a path through the jungle. It took us much longer than the 10-hours that it normally took, and we were completely tuckered out when we got there.

The boys had never seen cattle before and so they had to get used to them. Also, we had to make halters for each of the cattle as we had to lead them. It would have been impossible to drive them ahead of us through the jungle.

Two lay-missionaries, Peter Freestone and Gerald Lacy came with us and we set off with four heifers and a young bull. I was so glad that Pete and

Gerry came with us as they would go ahead with the trainees who were carrying our supplies and search out a suitable place to set up camp.

It took four drama packed days to reach Ossima and there was much rejoicing and excitement when we finally crossed the final obstacle, a flooded Ossima river, and the nucleus of our herd was in place.

It soon became obvious that the local grass, although lush and green, would not sustain the cattle and so clearing the jungle started in earnest and improved pastures were planted.

It also became obvious that we would need more cattle, or it would take many years for our herd to grow and so we began to source more cattle.

I had heard that the SVD missionaries had a large herd on Muschu Island and I could purchase 30 head. Little did I know what was ahead of us. Bro Luke and I set out for Wewak to the SVD mission. Luke was our mission pilot and he needed a break and so came with me. Luke had also worked with cattle before becoming a pilot and without him we would never have got the cattle to the ship.

The SVD plane flew us across to the island and then we were on our own. To pick out 30 head we were going to need a holding pen and so we went in search of the yards. There was only one large pen and it certainly would not hold cattle in the state it was in. We found some tools and material up at the mission and were able to fix the yard and then we spent the remaining hours of the day getting the cattle into the yard. The cattle were semi wild as they had not been handled for years, they were just running free on the Island. Some of the Island lads helped us as they wanted to be rid of the cattle which were destroying their gardens. We had penned enough by nightfall to be able to pick out 30 head. Both Luke and I were tuckered out and went to check where we were going to spend the night. Fortunately, the old mission house was in remarkably good condition and had a couple of bedrooms with bed and mattress.

When I negotiated the deal with the SVD Fathers, I never thought to ask them of conditions on the Island. I just presumed that there were missionaries there and the cattle project was well managed. How wrong I was.

We did find some tins of baked beans and that was it. We were too tired to even heat the tins, but we scoffed them down and then went to bed.

We were up at 3AM as we had a long hard day ahead of us. Again, we were grateful that a few of the young men came down to the yard to help us. Luke and I would pick out a likely looking heifer. We would then catch it and tackle it to the ground and truss it up. We had made up a stretcher out of copra bags and while Luke and I picked out another animal, the local lads would carry the trussed up animal to the beach, The ship that I had chartered was due at the Island at 3PM and wanted to be away by dark

We worked right up to that time without a break but managed to get all the cattle to the beach but there was still a lot to do. We loaded 3 heifers into a boat each time and took them out to the ship. Pens had been erected on the deck and so Luke stayed on the ship to untie the heifers and helped them to their feet. I was still on shore loading the heifers. It was 6PM when the ship finally got under way. Luke and I had been going since 3AM without a break. I do not think that I have ever worked so hard or for so long in my life but, we had our 30 heifers most of which were pregnant but not too far advanced.

As soon as the ship was on its way, I was seasick. I grabbed a chair, took it right down to the back of the boat and collapsed into it. I was able to see all the cattle from where I sat. One of the crew came down for a closer look at the cattle at the same time one of the heifers coughed and at the same time opened its bowels which spurted onto the crewman. He came to where I was and leaned over to wash the dung off. Unfortunately, he slipped. There was nothing I could do as I was too sick to move and so I just called out "Man overboard" The message finally got to the captain and he came to where I was sitting and he shouted abuse at the man in the water. Eventually when the man was just a blob on the horizon, he turned the ship, went back, and picked him up without a word.

We anchored off the Lote beach early the following morning. The cattle were then unloaded into the water. Luke and I were swimming around putting ropes on them and then they were pulled ashore and tied to a coconut tree. They were ashore but still a long way from Ossima and it was some weeks before they were quiet enough to lead on the trail to

Ossima. We did the same trek again as we did with the first lot and they thrived when they got onto some decent grazing.

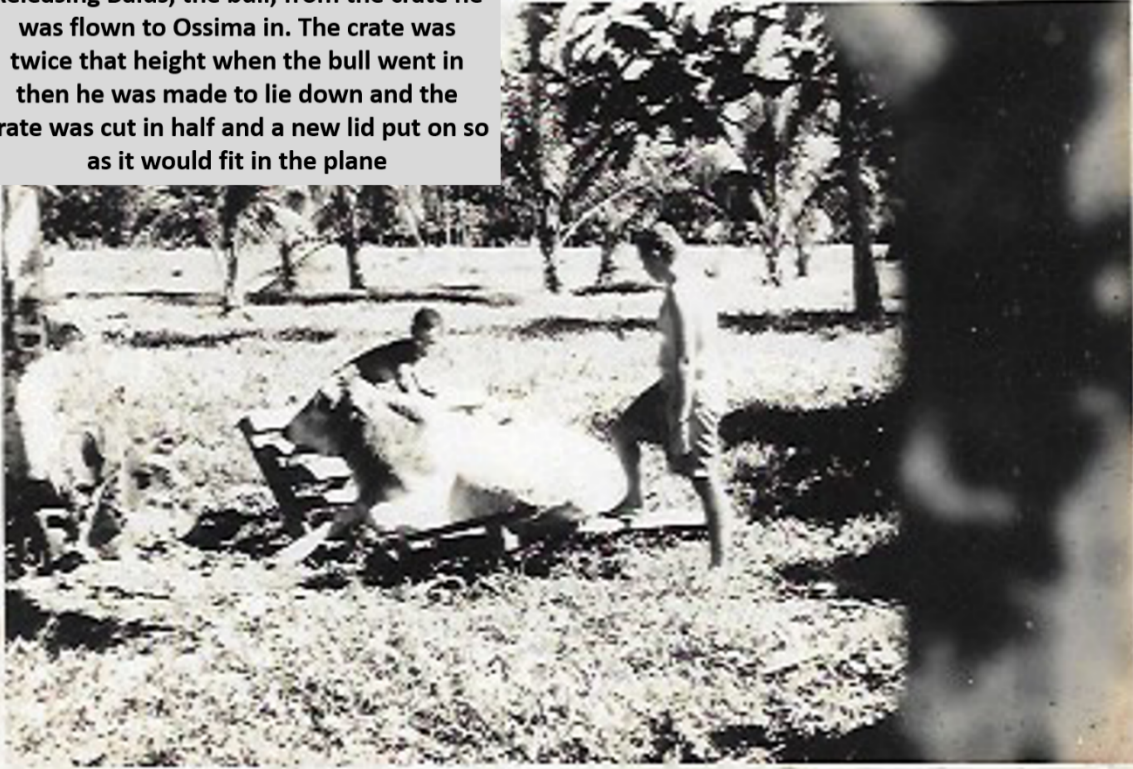
Nothing came easy in getting the agricultural project going. There was another cattle trek when 13 heifers and 4 bulls were donated by a Queensland grazier in that first year, I was incredibly happy with the herd we now had but we needed a good bull to keep improving the herd. Again, I called on my Queensland friends and they sent a Brahman bull and 3 Brahman heifers which came to Vanimo by ship. The ship was due into Vanimo at 5PM, the problem was that there were already 2 ships tied up side by side at the wharf. I went aboard the commercial ship and told the captain about the cattle and that they really needed to be unloaded that night. He was extremely helpful and said that he would go and anchor in the bay for the night, but we needed the other ship to move first, it was an Australian naval vessel. I climbed aboard the ship and went looking for the captain and asked him if he could move out so our ship could come against the wharf so as we could unload but he refused and no matter what I said, he was not going to move. The cattle were quite distressed and needed to be unloaded and nightfall was not far off and so I asked the captain of the commercial ship if he could help with the unloading and it was agreed that we would sling the cattle one by one over the naval ship, change slings mid-air and then onto the wharf. It all went very well, that is until we came to the bull, the last to be unloaded. Something went wrong as they were changing the slings and the bull came crashing down onto the naval vessel. I immediately jumped onto the ship, grabbed the bull by the head and twisted his head right back to prevent him getting to his feet. There was nothing else I could do. If I let go, there is no saying what would have happened and so I lay there holding the bull and gave instructions. The captain of the commercial ship had a net that we could use and while we were trying to get the net around and under the bull, the navy captain came and told me to get up and get off his ship and take the bull with me. There was an exchange of words and eventually we were able to leave his ship and the bull also left a deposit for the captain. I stayed in Vanimo for a few days, giving the cattle a chance to recover from the trip and eventually flew the cattle one by one to Ossima. Everything went well again until we came to the bull. He was crated lying down but his head was outside the crate and under

the dual controls of the aircraft. I had a tight grip of his nostrils and managed to keep him quiet until we were over Ossima and coming into land when I got a cramp in the hand which was holding the bull. As soon as I released the grip of his nose, he flung his head up hitting the dual controls and sent the plane into a dive. Fortunately, no damage was done to the controls, and the pilot soon had the plane under control, and I had the bull under control. We landed without further incident.



The Bull as he came off the plane

Releasing Balus, the bull, from the crate he was flown to Ossima in. The crate was twice that height when the bull went in then he was made to lie down and the crate was cut in half and a new lid put on so as it would fit in the plane



While all this was going on, the jungle was being cleared and grasses planted. This was kept going for years as we had to keep in front of the growing herd.

There were other projects that needed to be kept going, fencing the pasture, building yards and a cattle crush so as the cattle could be checked. The first group of trainees grew into a fine lot of young men. They were having 3 good meals a day and with the work they were doing they developed into strong young men.

There were other adventures in setting up the training centre. I bought a new Ford 3000 tractor which had to be pulled apart and loaded into the mission Cessna. It took 10 loads to get it to Ossima and then of course it had to be reassembled again. Fortunately, I had a young lay missionary, who came off a farm, at Ossima for a year and he was a huge help. A 2nd hand tractor was up for auction. I did not think that there would be many bidders, so I bid five dollars. As it turned out I was the only bidder. It was too old to pull apart and so I took 30 boys over to Bewani to bring it back overland. Normally the walk took six hours but driving the tractor took six days. We had to build bridges as well as letting it down a cliff with ropes and then when we got to Ossima we had to build a raft to get it

across the river. It all took a lot of hard work, but it was certainly well worth it as having 2 tractors, speeded up the clearing of the jungle.



Tractor won at auction, \$50. in Bewani. Bringing it overland to Ossima. Boys preventing it from rolling over. Bro Jim ready to jump.

The Tjoeng family

As Time went by, we soon had to start thinking about marketing our animals. We were able to kill one each month for the mission, but their numbers were building up fast and so I decided to go into Vanimo to see what chance there was of selling some in the town. We killed one, cut it up into chunks, put it into plastic bags with a price marked on each bag and took it into the local market which was set up along the beach every Friday. We sold out in no time and so we did another one the following week. While I was in town waiting for the meat to be sold, a young Asian man came and introduced himself to me. He had just set up a supermarket in Vanimo and wanted to buy our beef. I told him that I was not interested in selling to him as I wanted the local people to have access to cheap meat. He invited me to his office to talk it over and that afternoon was the making of Ossima, and it was also the start of a long friendship for me with Robert and Brenda Tjoeng. That was early 1970's and we are still

very good friends They are not only friends, but they are extremely generous benefactors to this day.



Reassembling the tractor which was flown to Ossima in pieces.

The Farm

Robert paid us a visit to Ossima as he wanted to see in which way, he could help us and in the long run to help his business. I had no issue with that if he was not ripping off the local people with the sale of meat as it was important that they get the benefit of protein in their diet. The arrangement we came to be was that he could sell the better cuts of meat to the expatriates for what mark-up he could get. The cheaper cuts were packed in the pre-marked plastic bags and sold at a price the local people could afford. It also meant that we were able to get more for each beast. There were always crowds waiting around the store when they knew that there was meat from Ossima on the way in.

Robert could not believe the amount of work we had done in such a short time. He could also see the potential. It was not long after that first visit when a bulldozer arrived at Ossima. I taught 2 or 3 of the trainees how to drive and after that the bulldozer hardly ever



stopped. It was a huge help with the clearing, but we were also able to build dams. Some of our earlier trainees had also started on their own blocks and so we were able to help them with their clearing of the jungle.

The cattle were thriving, but I could see that with better management there were no limits to what could be achieved. And so, after talking things over with Robert, we decided that we needed a good set of cattle yards. The next thing I knew was that we had a couple of loads of 4" and 2" gal pipe and that I had a big job ahead of me. Having good yards was a way to improve the quality of our meat. You could work on the cattle without stressing them out. We also installed a weighing platform so that growth weights could be recorded. The cattle could easily be ear tagged so as proper breeding records could be kept.

A race from the yards to the slaughterhouse was built so as the cattle for slaughter could be led without stress to the killing pen.

After the lads had finished their training, they would then go back to their own land and start out on the clearing in readiness for their farms. I would go with the trainees to help clear 5 acres of jungle, plant it with improved pasture and fence it. Once that was done the young farmer would come and choose a pregnant heifer which he would proudly lead to his block.

It was going to be a long time before the farmer would have any cattle for market and so I had to come up with something that would keep him interested and earn a living at the same time. We started breeding guinea pigs and pigeons. These were fast growing and a great source of protein for the farmer and his family.

Pigs

Then I decided to branch out into pigs. Robert arranged a meeting with the farm manager at Wacol prison farm and their piggery was one of the best in Australia. The guy looking after the piggery was a murderer never to be released but he was just so helpful in explaining everything I wanted to know. I could not wait to get back to Ossima to get started. I was lucky to have my nephew working with me at that time and together we soon had the piggery on the way.

Again, it was Robert who provided all the materials necessary to get the pigs up and running. It was a successful project and we were soon able to expand into the villagers. Pens were built in the villages. The farmers would get 6 pigs which they grew to market weight and when they were ready, I would go and slaughter the pigs, take them back to Ossima and dress them for sale. The farmers would then buy another 6 pigs and still have money left over. The piggery was highly successful as the farmers were able to have a regular income while they worked away at clearing jungle for their cattle projects



Ossima piggery. In full production 30 a week slaughtered.



Crocodiles

I was happy with the way things were going but there were still a lot of people who needed help but were too far away from Ossima for us to help and so we branched out into crocodiles. Most of the inland people had access to rivers where there were plenty of crocodiles and so they were able to catch young crocs and send them to Ossima on the mission plane. This was a great source of income for the inland people and it made it possible for them to send their kids to school as well as buy goods from the trade stores.



Bro Jim buying crocs. Sister Ollie looking on

When I left Ossima there were over 2000 crocs in the pens, another 2000 would have been sold for their skins or for meat

DOV Construction

After 25 wonderful years at Ossima, the bishop flew in unexpectedly one morning and told me he needed me in Vanimo as he had big plans and would like me to take charge. I was shocked. I knew that there had been a lot of talk about these plans but at no time was I part of them. However, I went and packed my goods while the bishop waited. The people got to hear about it and very soon there was a big angry mob milling around the plane. I was able to quieten them and the pilot wasted no time in getting airborne. It was only after we had taken off that I realized I had not said goodbye to anyone.

The move was a real challenge for me as I had to set up DOV Construction as soon as possible so as we could go ahead with other projects, the main one being the building of the technical high school.

Setting up DOV construction was really exciting as I was virtually given an open cheque to get what was needed and so I went on a spending spree. I bought 2 dump trucks and a backhoe to start with. I also got a Nissan ute for myself so as I had freedom of movement which was especially important. I needed to go to landowners to negotiate for sand, river gravel and koronas. I had a big team of workers at the school site and another team at the DOV site and so needed to move from one place to the other to keep things going. I also liked to be hands on and so was heavily involved on both sites.

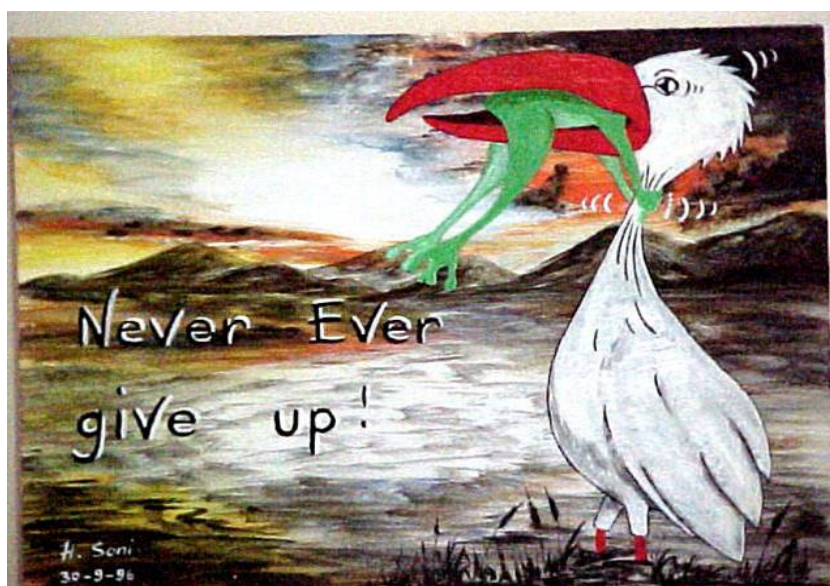
Senta Bilong Helpim.

I was in my office at DOV Construction when one of the village men came to see me. He had a wallet in his hand and he asked me if I knew who it belonged to and, as a matter of fact I did know who it belonged to as one of our workers told me that morning that he had lost his wallet. The guy told me his name was Harry Soni and that he had found the wallet on his way home from hospital. I was extremely impressed with Harry as there were not too many men that would have gone looking for the owner of the wallet, especially as it had a couple of hundred Kina in it.

I then asked Harry what he was doing at the hospital and he told me that he had gone to pick up his son as he had been told that they could not cure his illness so they were sending him home to die. I told Harry that I would like to visit his son after I had finished work and so that evening, I visited Harry's home. As I entered, I saw this little boy sitting on the floor in the corner of the room and he was propped up with a lot of pillows and the first thing that struck me was his head. He had this enormous head on a frail little body and there was no way that he could sit up without all the pillows. It was sad to see. I knew that if he were in Australia he could be treated, and it was then that I decided to try and do something about it. I did not say anything to Harry or his wife as I did not want to give them false hope. I rang my sister Joan who worked in administration at the Ringwood hospital in Melbourne. I told her about the little boy and asked her to talk to one of the specialists at the hospital to see if anything could be done. He was extremely positive and said yes but he would need surgery which would cost \$4000.00. money which I did not have. My

sister did not give up and she contacted Monash medical Centre and was put on to Dr Elizabeth Lewis, a neurosurgeon. She did not say a lot but told Joan to get me to ring her. I immediately rang her, and I must say that my hopes went down when I heard her speak, I would never have picked her as a surgeon. Anyhow, I told Elizabeth all about Darren and all Elizabeth said was "Get him down here". I said that I did not have any money for that type of surgery. She replied, who said anything about money, you just get him down here. Even that was easier said than done. I will not bore you with the details but believe me it took heaps of work getting passports and visas and when they heard the child was sick there was even more rigmarole. Anyhow we got Harry and Darren down to Melbourne and into the safe hands of my sister Irene who took care of Harry and Darren for the 3 months that they were there and Elizabeth operated on Darren, successfully I might add as Darren is still going today and still has the tube going from a little pump in his head which drains the fluid from his head to his stomach.

Darren required a lot of physiotherapy, as he had never walked or even stood up, and Christine Blackburn, the therapist at Monash, took care of that. Darren still could not walk when he returned to PNG and I did not think that he would ever walk, however Christine sent a video back with Darren, showing the exercises that he needed to do. We organised a team of volunteers and they drew up a roster so as Darren got the exercises every day of the week and so that really was the birth of the Senta bilong Helpim. Darren was nearly 4 years old when he took his first step. It took months of pain and tears and perseverance for that day to come and our motto became



It was quite amazing, news soon got around about what was being done for Darren and soon people started bringing their children with all kind of disabilities. I could not say no and so I took videos of all those that came and sent them to Christine at Monash. She would then send back a video of exercises for each child. Some of the children needed serious corrective surgery and so were sent to Monash. For the less complicated, doctors from Monash, recruited by Elizabeth, came to PNG, and operated. Over the years, I sent 26 children to Australia for surgery and thankfully they were all successful. Elizabeth Lewis became very much a part of the Senta and each year she made a visit and would bring different surgeons with her.

We had achieved a lot at Dov Construction while I was there. The boy's technical school was up and running. We started the seminary and it was well underway as were a variety of other buildings for the diocese. We had Dov Construction very well set up with a big woodworking factory as well as a mechanical workshop, a tank making and sheet metal workshop. We had another workshop where we fabricated chairs, tables school desks and other furniture. From there I moved into the procurator's office from where I took care of the morning radio schedule, saw to the needs of the outstations, and prepared the loads to be flown out by mission plane. During this time, we suffered 2 huge disasters, the first was the crash of the mission plane with the loss of life of the pilot Fr Joseph and 4 mission teachers. The 2nd was the tsunami at Sissano where I found myself in charge of the rescue and supply operation for the first week of the disaster.

It was not long after this that I resigned from the work of the diocese and took over the running of the Senta bilong Helpim which I had started a couple of years earlier.

I was in that work until I left PNG and they were the most wonderful 12 years of my life.

I left PNG in May 2005 after 43 years.

Tsunami

It was the 17th July 1998 at 7pm when the tsunami hit Aitape . It is something I find difficult to talk or write about, even now, and so I am including an article I wrote shortly after the Tsunami.

"It is just over 3 weeks since the disaster caused by the huge tidal wave happened, and things have quietened down considerably. However, it will be a long time before those people who survived the disaster will be back to any kind of normal life.

Now that things have quietened down, I thought that it was time for me to say thank you. For days now, I have been going over in my mind how best to thank you all, for your support and generosity. Just to write and say "Thank you" does not seem to be enough. I cannot express just how deeply grateful I am for that support and generosity, and I speak not only for myself but for all those caught up in the rescue operation, especially the victims. To give some idea of my gratitude, I have decided to express all my feelings and my version of the events from the time that I got word on Saturday, 18th. July at 8.00a.m. in writing.

I would like to try and give some insights of how I saw it, from my involvement in Vanimo, how people have reacted and how the victims have also reacted. I was going to say felt instead of reacted, but I can't tell you how they felt, but perhaps I can give you an idea of their reactions, by telling the story as I saw it, I am hoping that you will see just why I am so grateful to all of you. I cannot single out any one person, as there are just so many from right across Australia, New Zealand and indeed, the world, who have opened their hearts and been so generous to those in need in their time of crisis.

As I have already said, I first got word at 8 o'clock on the Saturday morning. Each day at 8 o'clock I do the mission radio sked. That is, I call all the different outstations in the area by radio, to find out their needs or problems, and then try to take care of them. Little did I know what was in store when I switched on the radio on the morning of Saturday the 18th.

The first thing I heard is that there had been a tidal wave at Sissano and that the area had been devastated, I rang Fr. Austin at Aitape to find out a bit more and it was obvious to me that, when he answered the phone, that it was very serious, but it certainly did not register just how serious, and that the people would need help. I knew straight away that the only way to reach the people would be by helicopter and so at about 8.05, I rang Mr. Paul Green, manager for Highlands Gold. I had never had the pleasure of meeting Paul, but I had called on him once before when the people needed help during the drought and that time he responded

magnificently to my call for help. This time was no different. I told him there had been a tidal wave and that we would need a helicopter to rescue people. His only question was "How long do you want it for?" I told him, "Paul, it could be 1,2 or 3 days. It may even be 6,7 or 8 days; I just don't know". He said, "Get back to me in 10 minutes" which I did and **was** told, "There's a chopper on the way". He did not waste time **wanting to know** who was going to pay, he knew that people needed help and that was enough for him to set things in motion.

Having called Paul, I then went down to see Philip Tjoeng. Philip is one of the Tjoeng family and they run Vanair here in Vanimo and his reaction was no different to that of Paul Green's. Straight away he alerted the hangar and put his planes on standby. There was no question of who is going to pay? His concern was to do what he could to help the people.

Andrew Sumner, manager of MAF, mission aviation fellowship, in Vanimo, responded as any other missionary would and put his planes at the ready for any evacuation work.

Dr. Les Roberts-Thompson and his partner Rachel were told of the disaster and immediately volunteered to help. Within no time they were on a plane and off to Sissano where they worked tirelessly for 4 days, treating victims in a makeshift aid post, and preparing the serious ones for airlifting to hospital. The survivors have so much to be grateful for. The fact that they had a doctor of Les' ability, his gentleness and concern for people along with Rachel as his offsider, gave them a far **greater** chance of survival.

As I had started to get things organised it just seem to follow, that people looked to me as the co-ordinator and I must say there was a really great working relationship with all those involved in the operation. At no stage did anyone question my role and all workers from public servants, police, business and private sector and the different church groups did whatever was asked of them. I really do feel privileged to have worked with such people and I thank them for their co-operation. Our role was to get whatever supplies were needed to those in the field and to transport the victims from the planes to the hospitals. Hundreds of tonnes of food were transported, thousands of litres of water, whatever medical supplies were needed and were available, also there were dozens of searchers and volunteers for burying parties, all had to be flown in. Loads had to be weighed and ready so as there was no delay in turning the aircraft around. There was one tireless worker throughout and that was Adrian Visser. Adrian, along with his sons and employees were there moving cargo and patients throughout the operation. Again, I would like to say that it was a real privilege to work with such people.

*The first day of the disaster, I guess that I was too tied up in organising to analyze what I really felt. When Ray Martin asked me during an interview what my feelings were, I felt angered that he would ask such a question, expecting an immediate answer in just a few seconds. But when I eventually got to bed at night, I would try to sort out my feelings, I do not think that I really did sort them out as they were very mixed and confused. I felt stunned, I felt **sorrow**, but I also felt joy, yes joy for the fact that there were survivors, because when you stop to think of it, it is certainly miraculous that anyone survived. I am sure that most of you would have had the experience of being tossed around and dumped by a wave at the beach. Well just try to imagine this ... a 15-metre wall of water (that is an accurate figure measured by the debris on the coconut trees left standing) the first thing in its path are dozens of coconut trees. These are snapped off or torn out of the ground and so now it is not only a wall of water but a wall of water with dozens of coconut trees being tossed around inside of it. The next thing in its path are the villages. Hundreds of houses, hundreds of people being thrashed around with all the coconut trees and other trees that had been uprooted. As if that is not enough there were 2 other waves of equal ferocity. People were crushed, people were drowned but people also survived. That is the reason for joy, that is the reason why the people who survived fell to their knees and thanked God. How else was it possible to survive such a monstrous freak of nature?*

As the planes landed with the victims, I began to think why are they sending in all the young men? Where are the women and children? Of course, the men survived because of their strength but there was little chance for the women and children. Getting back to my feelings, having thought about it at night and thought about that wave, pictured it in my mind, pictured the area which I know well, having been over it many times. When I was back at work at the airport, I was overjoyed each time a plane landed and had more, survivors. For sure, they were battered and bruised, torn and broken, but alive. You cannot imagine the extent of the injuries, you just cannot imagine

*There was one woman, one of many, whose story of survival is amazing. I have become very friendly with her and her family, probably because her 10-month-old son, Michael, gets so excited whenever he sees me. He claps and laughs and always wants to come with me. I take him around the hospital every night and every patient enjoy his visit. But his mother, clutched him to her breast and they came through with hardly a scratch but poor Lucy, the little 6 year old daughter was at the mother's side but her little body was just so badly battered that I did not think that she would survive. Her head was fractured, blood was coming out her ears, her eyes were like two blood clots, her face was bruised and swollen, there was hardly a sound piece of skin on her body and one of her legs was shattered. She, like so many of the **survivors**, had swallowed and inhaled huge*

amounts of sand and muddy water, which put them at real risk of pneumonia. How could Lucy survive? Even more amazing, how did little Michael come through practically unscathed? I am sure that God must have very special plans for him.

I visited the hospital every night and as often as I could during the day, but at night I liked to sit and listen to their stories. Many of the mothers tell of clutching their babies to their breasts like Michael's mother, but all of them were drowned even though the mothers were still clutching them when the waves subsided. Yet Michael survived, amazing!!

The planes (we had 5 working in the first 3 days) kept coming in, bringing in victims and taking back supplies, but in those first days we saw nothing of the helicopters. They would ferry the patients to Sissano where they would then be picked up by plane

In the first 2 days, Paul Green with his offsider Philip and pilot Max, rescued 450 patients, but to rescue them they went through sheer hell. Whenever Max landed the helicopter, people tried desperately to get in. You can imagine the state of their minds at this stage. Dead bodies were all around them, the place was absolutely devastated and all they wanted to do was get out because they were so fearful. Paul and Philip had to try and keep them back and out of the helicopter, as well as select victims and load them into the chopper. This was probably the hardest part for Paul, there were just so many injured that he had to decide which ones he thought had a chance of survival and the ones he thought had no chance, he had to leave behind. The pilot did some amazing flying from what I hear, landing in places that no one else would dare to land a helicopter. They found a couple of doors floating in the lagoon which they grabbed and used under the skids so as not to sink too far into the swamp. While Max ferried the patients, Paul and Philip hacked their way through the swamp in search of others and then prepared places so as the helicopter could land.

Back at Sissano Dr. Les, Rachel and some of the sisters from Vanim, were patching up people as quickly and as best they could with the meagre supplies available. Paul Cheevers was there trying to organise planes at that end. It was difficult because of the shortage of stretchers but on the other hand, had all the patients been on stretchers, we would have been limited with the numbers that could be put into the planes. So, the people had to suffer, and how they must have suffered with their shattered limbs, their pierced lungs, huge wounds, flesh torn off, massive bruising from being hit by trees and other debris. With all that, they had to be lifted into the plane and then lifted out of the plane and onto the back of an open truck, no mattresses, and then driven over rough roads to the hospital

where they were unloaded and had to wait for the one doctor at the hospital, Dr. John Novetti, to get around to treat them.

That is one of the things that really puzzles me. Why did it take so long before we got any outside help? For sure it was a long weekend, a 4-day weekend, but surely the response to such a huge disaster should have been much quicker. It was the Australian Defence Force that first came to our aid. They were magnificent those men, very well trained for this sort of emergency. Very professional, calm, and efficient in the way they went about their work. What I cannot understand is why these men were not given complete control. Obviously, they were the experts. Many of them had been in similar situations before and those that had not, had certainly been highly trained in what to do in such a situation. It would have given PNG defence and police force a great opportunity to learn from the experts. But unfortunately, that was not to be, however they did come and set up their field hospital where they treated and saved many victims.

Then the team from Monash Medical Centre arrived, my dear friends who I cannot thank enough. I have just so much love, respect, and admiration for those women. For years now they have been helping the people in this area by coming and operating in the hospital here, or by operating on the children we send to Monash. As soon as they heard that there was a disaster, they were here in a flash.

There was Dr. Elizabeth Lewis a neurosurgeon. Elizabeth was my first contact with Monash. Dr. Annette Holian, an orthopaedic surgeon, had been here 3 times before. Dr. Prue Keith, an orthopaedic registrar was here for the first time. Then there was Lois Van Heuzen, a theatre sister, up for the second time, Chris Blackburn a physiotherapist was here for her third visit and along with John Kinealy, a plaster technician from Western Hospital, worked tirelessly in the wards, setting tractions and doing casts under very hot, cramped and difficult conditions.

This team would start work at 8.00 a.m. and it would be midnight before we sat down to the evening meal. They were simply amazing. Unfortunately, there were a couple of simple- and narrow-minded medical people here who had their noses out of joint and put in adverse reports about the work of the Monash team and the Army doctors. I guess that we will never know what prompted such reports except perhaps some sort of senseless gratification or jealousy. Even more astounding is that those in authority would act on such reports without first looking into them. A pity because everyone else here and certainly all the victims, have nothing but praise for the men and women that worked so hard to save lives and mend broken bodies.

The stoicism of the victims is the thing that really impressed John Kinealy. He was putting on casts, in the wards, without even an anaesthetic. Down south you would not even consider doing it, but the urgency here was so great, doctors and anaesthetists so short, that there was no other option. But that stoicism also struck me. I mentioned earlier that I felt joy each time I opened the door of the plane and saw more survivors. That joy soon turned to sorrow when I could see the pain and agony etched on their faces, but throughout the whole ordeal of lifting them out of the plane and onto trucks, I did not hear one complaint. At times there were groans of pain but no complaining. Even the kids, they were just so strong that I could not help but admire them. You can see my confusion of thoughts, from joy to sorrow to admiration.

At this stage, most of the survivors did not know if their loved ones had survived or not. Parents did not know if their children were alive. Husbands did not know if their wives were alive, nor did wives know if their husbands had survived. But saddest of all were the children who did not know where their parents or siblings were.

It was many days after the disaster when we were able to turn the sorrow to joy for some that had been mourning the death of their loved ones. For a few we were able to tell them their relatives were alive in Aitape or Wewak. Thanks, must go to the staff of Radio Australia for helping out in announcing the names of survivors at different places.

I lost track of time as one day ran into another but as I mentioned it was 3 days before the first outside help arrived. I was still co-ordinating things at the airport. We still had the same number of planes working, but we did have a couple of extra choppers, but there should have been more helicopters as soon as the news of the disaster came out. Paul Green was telling me of some of the victims he rescued. Some were impaled on mangrove trees; one woman had a branch through the vagina, and it came out under her rib cage. Others were buried in mud. The doctor at Aitape told me that there would certainly have been more deaths had Paul Green not responded to the call for help, but there would have been a lot more saved had there been more choppers from day one. People who survived for 3 or 4 days were dying from shock or dehydration.

The relief work was going well but there were some problems, the biggest of which was crowd control. Whenever a plane landed, hundreds would flock around it to see if their loved ones were on board. Unfortunately, people were concerned, but they were not only putting their lives at risk by being hit by a propeller, they were also making it exceedingly difficult to get the victims from the planes to the trucks. There were others who tried to board the planes so as

they could go to the disaster area, but they had to be refused because there were just not enough planes to do the work that was required. As well as food, water, and medical supplies, they also needed huge amounts of aviation fuel for the helicopters. There were large numbers of volunteers needed for search parties and burial parties. Those people were the real heroes and did not get a great deal of recognition for the work they did. As you can imagine the bodies became bloated and started to decompose very quickly, but nevertheless they had to be collected and buried. After day 3, nets were made from chicken wire and the volunteers dragged them through the lagoon to gather the bodies which were then doused with petrol and burned. At day 4 the whole burial operation had to be called off and the area abandoned because of the health risk to the volunteers.

Another big problem was the media. Obviously, they were needed and obviously they did a good job in getting the story out but there some who were totally insensitive to what was going on around them. They wanted a story at any cost, although they were, in some cases, hampering the operation. Majority were okay, but some really were obnoxious. ABC's Sean Dorney and Scott Bevan and his team from Current Affairs were excellent and quite professional as well as being aware and concerned with what was going on around them.

Things started to go bad when the politicians came on the scene. Up until then everything was running smoothly. The Governor of Sandaun was a problem, but we were able to manage him. However, the Prime Minister was a law unto himself and caused a lot of confusion. I went head to head, or toe to toe with him at the airport and in my usual frank way, said to him things that I thought needed to be said. In hindsight, it was probably not the right approach and for some reason I got the distinct impression that the Prime Minister did not like me and it was later in the day that I heard that I had been sacked. Sacked from a position that I had not been appointed to. When word of the sacking came through, it brought things to a complete standstill as others refused to work unless I was reinstated. The following day I was flown to Aitape for another meeting with the Prime Minister and he explained that I had not been sacked and he wanted me to continue doing what I had been doing. The only difference was that he had declared a state of emergency and the constitution stated that an army officer or a police officer had to be in charge.

It is not every day that one gets the chance to talk to a Prime Minister and I certainly was not going to let such an opportunity slip by. At the end of it all, I am sure that his ears were ringing, and I had lost my voice. Probably he was wishing that I had lost it a lot sooner.

That same day, I had my first chance to see for myself, the devastated area. I had built up a picture in my mind of what it would be like, but believe me, I could

never ever have imagined what it was really like. To see the vastness of the devastation was unbelievable. The area was swept clean, parts of the coastline had disappeared. Again, I marvelled at the fact that there were so many survivors. I also had the chance to visit the Aitape hospital and from Paul Green's descriptions, I was able to recognize some of the people that he had rescued, including the woman impaled on the tree. She was still alive, but I have not heard if she survived. People at the hospital were terribly busy and the hospital grounds were full of walking wounded, all in a state of shock. When I arrived back in Vanimo, I went to continue with the work at the airport. The following day an army caribou was made available. This made a big difference. The smaller planes were released back to normal duties and the loading became so much easier as we were able to use a fork lift and so I felt that I was no longer needed there and so drifted up to the hospital where I was able to help out in all kinds of ways. A great number of patients needed traction, but there was nothing suitable at the hospital and so I got Bro. Martin to make up a frame and after some modifications he came up with a frame that was really very useful. He spent the weekend making up sufficient of them for all the patients. When the patients were evacuated to Wewak, the frames went with them and will no doubt be part of hospital for a long time to come.

I have not mentioned the magnificent response from the local people apart from those that volunteered for the burial teams. I was really keen to get the television people to do a story because I felt that it was important for the rest of the world to see just how they did respond. People from the different villages and from the town worked out rosters among themselves and did all the cooking and catering for the hospitals and care centres. Volunteers were organised so as there were volunteers around the clock, to care for the needs of the victims. All the while that they were caring for others, there were concerns that their own villages could be wiped out as someone had reported that the people on the North West coast were in danger from another wave. It was rather irresponsible reporting as other than abandoning their villages, there was nothing that they could do and the seismologist from the university of PNG told us that the chances of another such wave were one in a million.

As I mentioned, I was now able to spend more time with the victims, listening to their stories and crying with them. The hardest part for them was not the fact that they had lost everything, after all they do not possess many material things, but the fact that they were not able to properly mourn their dead. It is probably necessary in any society to have a body to mourn over but certainly here it is especially important. They need to sit with the body, hold it, tell stories about the dead person, cry, and wail over them, and of course this was not possible. As the days went by the people were gradually beginning to laugh. We were

showing videos such as “The Gods Must Be Crazy” and they really did enjoy them, but even though they are able to laugh and talk now I am sure that they will go through very bad times again when they return to their own area. The reality of it all will really hit them, but at least for the moment they are coping reasonably well. For those that can get out, I have organised car trips and for those that are not able to leave their beds I see that they get special treats such as fruit and ice cream. There are others like Wayne and Jane Dillon who do an enormous amount of good with regular visits to the hospital, showing the people that they love and care, which is important for the healing process.

The resettling process is going to be extremely hard because they are coastal people, who, for generations, have relied on the sea for their lively hood. Now, because of fear and circumstances, they must leave the sea and move inland and become bush dwellers, a complete change of lifestyle. One young lad at the hospital never wants to go back to his area. At the time of the wave, he was on his way back from the garden with the evening meal for his family. Fortunately for him he was on high ground when he saw the wave coming and so was not caught, but when it was over, he went to look for his family. He found his mother and father, both dead. He was unable to find his small brother or his 4 sisters. He did find his 7-year-old cousin and he is now looking after her in the hospital. His name is Anselm and only 19 years old. He does not know what he is going to do or where he is going to live, but one thing he knows for sure is that he will never go back. One of the big things that has impressed me is the faith of the people. They prayed to God to save them the night of the disaster, many prayed while they were still being tossed around in the wave, and now they are thanking God for saving them. One fellow who thought his time was up, made the sign of the Cross while still being tumbled around and then suddenly found himself out of the wave. It is certainly inspirational and although I have been here for 36 years trying to teach and spread the good news, I have learnt far more from the people than I could ever teach them. There was a song that has really touched my heart and since the disaster, I played it whenever I could, especially when I went to bed. Invariably it brings tears to my eyes. It is Charlie Lansborough's “My Forever Friend”

Thanks

To all those who made this story possible

There is much more that could be written but I don't want to drag it out, however, before I finish, there are people who did so much for me that I would like to thank.

Firstly, there is Robert Tjoeng. I mentioned Robert in my story, but he was a huge help and support to me especially in setting up the farm at Ossima and I am so appreciative of his support and friendship.

Then there was Philip and Fung Tjoeng, Robert's brother and sister, who followed on from Robert and their generosity was simply amazing and I owe so much to them.

My nephew, Paul Cheevers, came to Ossima for a visit and ended up staying for 3 years. Paul was a huge help around the farm and he also put his carpentry skills to great use. Thank you, Paul!

Elizabeth Lewis was another whose love and support cannot be measured. The Senta bilong Helpim and all its children and volunteers, owe so much to Elizabeth and of course Elizabeth was a wonderful support to me in making the Senta what it is today.

Then there was all those that came under Elizabeth's umbrella, too many to name in case I miss someone.

Arend de Weger also involved the Knights of the Southern Cross in many ways. They raised money for the material needs of the Senta and made their homes welcome to the children, with their guardians, who came to Brisbane for medical procedures.

Irene Carmen, my sister, also made it possible for many children, with their guardians, to come to Melbourne for surgery. There was one little girl who went to Melbourne with her mother who I thought when sending them off that the mother was a little bit pregnant but how wrong was I. The mother ended up in one hospital to have her baby and the daughter in another to have her surgery. Poor Irene was run off her feet going from one hospital to the other. Everything worked out in the end. I cannot thank Irene and the Knights in Brisbane, enough for all the love and care

that made it possible for all those children to receive the surgery that gave them the chance of a normal life.

Three special young ladies who generously gave years of their lives to work at the Senta were Claire, Karen and Abby. One of the main reasons for the Senta was to make these disadvantaged children feel that they were loved and they got so much love from these three young ladies. A group of the children came to me one Friday afternoon and said that they did not want to go home for the weekend. They wanted to stay at the Senta where they were loved.

I cannot finish without thanking Hugh McKenzie for sharing his wife, Pauline, with me. Pauline was a real gopher. She would go for this, that, and everything I asked of her over the years. I was afraid that I was calling on Pauline for so much that it might lead to a marriage breakup, but no, and I am just so blessed to have them as very dear friends today.

There are many more people who came into my life and made it possible for me to be able to carry out my work in PNG. I am indeed grateful to you all for making a difference to the lives of the poor in the Vanimo Diocese.



Special thanks

To The people of the Vaimo Diocese

Thank you for allowing me into your lives. My mission was to spread the good news of Jesus. You taught me far more than I could teach you. I have made many lifelong friendships which are very dear to me. I love you all so much.

I hope and pray that you will forgive me for my weaknesses and that you will remember me as a friend and a brother.

May the love of Jesus Christ and the love of His Passion, be ever in our hearts and souls.

